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Grant- The Charm and the Curse

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# THE CHARM AND THE CURSE.

A TALE DRAMATIZED FROM THE EDDA.

BY

CHARLES GRANT.

E. FROMMANN. JENA.

WILLIAMS AND NORGATE,
14, HENRIETTA STREET, COVENT GARDEN, LONDON;
AND 20, SOUTH FREDERICK STREET, EDINBURGH.

1873.

# THE CHARM AND THE CURSE.

Du stehst allein!
Dein Eigensinn verkennt die Wonne,
Wenn die Götter, du,
Die Deinigen und Welt und Himmel all
Sich ein innig Ganzes fühlten.

GOETHE.

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TO

## ANTON DOHRN.

In youth we plume our fancy's wings
To flit from sun to sun;
At length we fold them up, and then
A little work is done.

Compared with our imagined deeds,
How small and poor it seems!
But then one little act outweighs
A thousand glorious dreams.

Such as mine is, I bring it you;
You shared my early flight,
The eager joy, the passioned pain,
The darkness and the light.

When life's damp mists had dulled my wings
And dashed my dawn with grey,
With early hopes and boyish loves,
You did not pass away.

Long years are gone, yet now we stray
By this bright summer sea,
As once we wandered through the green
Beech woods of Germany.

VI

The tale that haunted then my th[illegible]
Has shaped itself at last
Into this form, though faulty, still
A keepsake of the past,

And therefore yours; so lay it by,
Like some old sketch you save,
Because, though but of little worth,
'T is dear for him who gave.

Naples. June 1873.

In the following dramas it has been the author's object rather to adapt and modernize than simply to reproduce the ancient myth, though he has never swerved from the earliest extant form of the tale when not compelled to do so by what seemed to him to be cogent dramatic reasons. The religious and social system which gave birth to the story has passed away, and many of the tragic motives which it once contained are so foreign to the ethical sentiment of our own times that it would have been a thankless task to endeavour to reproduce them. For these other trains of thought and feeling have been substituted. In a word, it is as a poem and not as an archæological study that the author wishes his work to be judged.

The names of Siegfried and Kriemhild at once suggest memories of the Nibelungenlied, while Sigurd and Gudrun recall the poetry of the Edda. On the other hand the earlier names of several of the persons sound strangely uncouth to English ears, and though this may seem but of small moment in a narrative poem, it is a matter of considerable importance in one intended for representation on the stage. This consideration has in some cases led to the substitution of the Middle High German form which may perhaps offend the eye of the scholar.

The drama demands a greater freedom in the treatment of the verse than is perhaps admissible in any other form of poetry. The licence taken in the following pieces is, however, far less than that claimed by the dramatists of the Shakespearean age.

The author is acquainted with Geibel's *Brunhild* but with no other modern adaptation of the story. Indeed, since he first conceived the idea of dramatizing it, more than ten years ago, he has carefully avoided reading any but philological works on the subject. Those who are capable of enjoying the exquisite poetry of Mr. Morris will at least acknowledge that he has displayed considerable self denial in keeping this resolution.

# BRUNHILDA'S BRIDAL.

MEMNON Durst you die, Sir?
SIPHAX. How? die, my lord!
MEMNON. Die, Siphax; take thy sword,
And come by that door to her? There's a price
To buy a lusty love at.

The Mad Lover.

## DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

SIGURD.

KING GUNTER.

HAGEN
GISELHER } *his brothers.*

*Lords and attendants.*

BRUNHILDA.

ODDRUN, *her foster-sister.*

GUDRUN, *sister to King Gunter.*

UTA, *an old woman, formerly nurse to Gudrun's mother.*

# Act I.

**Scene I.—Isenstein. A hall in Brunhilda's palace. ODDRUN, to her BRUNHILDA.**

BRUNH. Oddrun, he comes!
ODDRUN. Who comes?
BRUNH. Sigurd, my lord!
Sigurd, the dragon-slayer!
ODDRUN. Can it be
He should return after so many years
Of wayward wandering, and his fatal stay
Amid Giuki's kindred, where he dwelt
Forgetful of his oaths?—It cannot be.
BRUNH. If once in all the loneliness of years
His voice came to me on the winter wind,
Or, when a little cloud of dust was blown
Across the summer distance, to my heart
I cried it riseth from his courser's hoofs,
Give doubt full scope, nor trust me when I say:
My Sigurd comes, and all shall yet be well.
ODDRUN. Whence know you of his coming?
BRUNH. From afar
I heard his bugle ringing through the woods,
And searched the glades with eager, hungry eyes,
And the wide plain to westward, and the sea,
But found him not. Then all my heart grew sick
With disappointed longing, and I turned
In thought to go, when, even at my feet,
I heard the full note sounded once again,
And there I saw him standing, 'neath the hill,
Between the rifted woods, just on the spot
Where as he rode away six years ago

Fame has too loudly noised abroad my name,
Or said too little of the hero's deeds
Whom now I serve, else had you passed me by
To welcome these great Princes, Hagen here,
The brother of my noble lord, the King,
And this, his younger brother, Giselher.

BRUNH. My lord, you chide my lack of courtesy;
Welcome most noble Princes; welcome all.
Forgive me if I seemed too much to dwell
On Sigurd's glory; here you know his name
Like the sweet notes of a familiar tune
Springs lightly to the lips; you hold him dear;
When proudly through the streets of Worms he rides,
The women say, I doubt not: 'That is he,
The stranger knight who did the wondrous deeds';
But here we love to call his fame our own,
Are proud of him, and linger on his name,
And by the winter fire we tell his deeds,
Fighting his battles with him, claiming part
Of all his honours, as we fondly say
*Our* Sigurd slew the dragon. But, my lords,
I weary those with talking who no doubt
Are weary with their journey. Lead the King
To his appartment; let the Princes lie
Beside him, one on either hand, and see
All honour paid unto our noble guests.

GISELHER. (to Hagen) Is this the grim and haughty queen whose name
Is woven into tales of fear and death?

HAGEN. (to Giselher) Her praise of Sigurd bodes but little good
To our adventure.

GISELHER. Yet his might is ours.

(Exeunt Gunter, Hagen, Giselher, Lords, Maids and Attendants on various sides. Brunhilda stops Sigurd who is about to leave with the vassal lords.)

BRUNH. Nay, mighty Sigurd, I'll not lodge you so,
But as befits the noblest of the earth.
I long have waited for you, let me gaze
Upon your face once more; they are the eyes

Of Odin, but the lips are all your own.
Give me your shield to carry.
SIGURD. Noble Queen,
If there be any deed that I may do
Fitting a man in service of your Grace,
Speak, and it is accomplished; there is nought
I will not gladly venture in your cause,
Saving my service to my lord, the King;
If Gunter and Brunhilda's wills are one,
Sigurd is but the servant of that will.
BRUNH. Have honours grown so cheap at Gunter's court
That you would don the badge of servitude?
Or have you drained Fame's chalice till the dregs
Have grown distasteful to you? To my mind,
Sigurd and service rhyme as ill together
As Gunter and Brunhilda.
(Enter Servants with wine.)
Here is wine,
To Sigurd health, and length of happy days!
SIGURD. The same, most gracious lady, wait on you!
BRUNH. My lord, you have forgot the drinking rune
To shield you from the wiles of sorcery.
SIGURD. No harm can lurk within the cup you fill.
BRUNH. Give me your shield.—Nay, then you trust me not.
SIGURD. You do yourself dishonour.
BRUNH. Nay, my lord,
I but requite an ancient service done.
SIGURD. (aside) An ancient service? Do I wake or dream?
(Exeunt Sigurd, Brunhilda, and Servants. Enter Hagen.)
HAGEN. And so I lose the scent just as I thought
The fox would seek the open; off they go,
And I stand here at fault. The game we play
Is high, the dice are loaded, I alone
Possess the secret; one incautious word,
And then—farewell sweet life.
(Enter Lords unarmed.)
Where are your swords,
Your helmets, and your shields?
FIRST LORD. A knife and fork,
A goblet and a plate will serve my turn;
Why swords and shields and helmets?

SEC. LORD. Silken robes,
And golden chains, and jewels hath the Queen
Bestowed on us, a royal gift in pledge
Of peace and friendship.
HAGEN. Like unto a wheel
Is woman's heart, and falsehood swells her breast.
SEC. LORD. A dark suspicion ever taints your thought,
Most mighty Hagen. If we do but say
The wine is good, you straight begin to think
'T is sweet with poison.
THIRD LORD. Ay, the wary still
Has an ill office; if his counsels blunt
The edge of danger, we miscall them fears,
And make the safety he himself creates
His taunt; and if we scorn them, he partakes
The venture of our rashness; if we fall,
He shares our overthrow; so, for my part,
I link my will to Hagen's and will arm.
HAGEN. Thanks, noble lord, go to the King from me
And beg him for my love to arm himself,
Before he joins us in the banquet hall.
FIRST LORD. I will go tell Prince Sigurd.
HAGEN. He is safe,
His name is as a shield against his foes,
None will attack him, I will stand for him.
(Exit third Lord.)
SEC. LORD. And I will stand for all of us, my lord,
If we appear unarmed; but if we wake
The anger of Brunhilda by mistrust,
Or vex her proud eyes with the gleam of steel,
Our fear may well beget the woe we fear,
And caution herald danger.
HAGEN. Good my lord,
We'll say it is the custom of our land,
And, gentlemen, for once be ruled by me,
The Queen is crafty, and she loves us not.
(Exeunt Lords).
And truly she has little cause to love
Giuki's House; Sigurd was all her own,
Betrothed to her by Odin, bound to her

By every holy oath, before he came
Into our palace, and my mother laid
A spell upon him, drowning all his love
In dark forgetfulness, so that her form
Passed from him like a dream of yesternight,
And now he gazes on the face he loved
And knows it not.—While Uta keeps the ring
It cannot be but that the spell shall hold;
Yet great Brunhilda loves him still, and much
I fear me that her voice may wake in him
Forgotten longings, other hopes and dreams
Than suit our ends; the old love may awake,
The awful purpose of his early youth
May yet be perfected, and Odin's will
Accomplished; but for my part, I will use
All craft and cunning, strength and sorcery
To thwart it, and to bring to nought the plans
Of great Brunhilda and her race, und fence
My brother's throne from every threatened change.

(Exit Hagen. Enter Seneschal and Servants.)

FIRST SERV. How shall we place the guests?

SENESCHAL. Why, as of old,
Prince Sigurd by the Queen, and all the rest
Each after his degree.

SEC. SERV. They say the King
Shall wed Oddrun.

THIRD SERV. King Gunter?

SEC. SERV. Ay.

THIRD SERV. Well, well.
A double bridal, it may be.

SENESCHAL. The guests
Are hungry, and the cook will hold his hour,
There is no time for talk. Away!

(Exeunt Seneschal and Servants. Enter Brunhilda.)

BRUNH. Is this the joy for which my heart has yearned
So long, so vainly? do I grasp it now,
The one good thing that life can bring to me,
And find it thus? So cold, so cold, my lord?
What, not one kiss? In the old happy days
Thou wast not thus; and I have longed for thee

As doth the icebound sailor for the spring,
And often thou didst come to me in dreams,
Bending above me with thy piercing eyes
Deepened to tenderness and lips that glowed,
But ever, ere they touched my lips, I woke
And stretching forth my arms into the night
Clasped but the darkness; now I seem to grasp
For a warm hand a lifeless stone that chills
My heart with a vague sense of dread.—'My queen',
And 'humbly on my knee', such were his words.
Is not *love* more than *queen?* But yet he smiled
Frankly as one who is devoid of guile;
There seemed to be a mist before his eyes,
A filmy veil as if he walked in sleep,
And such, they say, will oft-times pass unharmed
Through headlong dangers, and since he is come,
It cannot be but all shall yet be well.

(Enter Seneschal and Servants.)

Here place my throne, and at the other end
Gunter's and Sigurd's. Unto both be paid
Equal observance, only when I pledge
The cup, then place it first in Sigurd's hand,
But make no other difference.

(Enter Sigurd unarmed, Gunter, Hagen, Giselher, Lords, and Attendants armed, Brunhilda's Lords unarmed, Oddrun and Maidens. The princes and lords are marshalled to their seats; Oddrun and maidens group themselves round Brunhilda.)

ODDRUN. Methinks that Sigurd's face is somewhat pale,
And in his motions and his looks there seems
A strange constraint that ought not to be there.

BRUNH. What say you to the Princes?

ODDRUN. Hagen draws
All eyes upon him; as a granite rock
His frame is knit, rugged the mighty face,
Yet not ungracious in its ruggedness
Though seamed by scars of many a battle storm,
Scarred but unshaken he, when shields were cleft,
Hath often stood triumphant. As thy lord
Is great in act, so in endurance he;
They're nobly matched.

BRUNH. Nay, but methinks his eyes
Are dark and baleful; Sigurd's are as clear
As sunshine after tempest.
ODDRUN. His are dark
As is the cloud, and bright as lightnings are,
Wild, fierce, and eerie; few shall trust in him,
And fewer love him, yet I count him great,
And though his thought be false, his heart is true.
BRUNH. And Giselher?
ODDRUN. Is gentler, as it seems,
And weaker, yet a hero.
BRUNH. Well and now
What say you to King Gunter?
ODDRUN. He alone
Could king it over Hagen, for command
Sits lightly on him, strength and pride in him
Are tempered down to law and clemency;
And did you bid me seek through all the world,
This am I sure, I should not find a king
Save only Gunter.
BRUNH. Lavish is your praise,
You have forgotten Sigurd.
ODDRUN. Him I place
Quite in a world apart, for Odin's blood
Is hot within him, Odin's wisdom sits
Upon his brow, his strength within his arm;
Great is Prince Sigurd; him of all mankind
Most gladly would I serve; 'twere good to die
Or suffer for him; but, I know not why,
His presence awes me, I can kneel to him
But not stand up before him. Even you,
Whose love has sistered me, at moments chill
My heart with dread; when stormfully at Yule
The tempests rend the forests, and the waves
Break in deep thunder on the castle rock,
Then ancient memories awake of times
When helmeted you rode upon the clouds
And summoned from the tumult of the fight
The gory guests of Odin, ere the lord
Of gods and men entranced you in the sleep

That Sigurd broke, and suddenly a change
Comes over all your features and your mien,
And speechlessly upon your face I gaze,
While love is lost in dread. Thus do I feel
To Sigurd, too, but upon Gunter's face
I look undazzled, and therein I read
Mercy, and faith, and human fortitude.

BRUNH. You praise him well, but see our guests are set.

(Brunhilda seats herself. Oddrun stands beside, the maidens behind her.)

FIRST LORD. We might have left this heap of steel behind.
It is a noble banquet.

SEC. LORD. Hagen still
Suspects a hidden snare.

FIRST LORD. Forewarned, forearmed
Has ever been his motto.

THIRD LORD. And the Queen
Has an ill name for sudden acts of wrath,
They say she loves to mingle in the fight,
And heroes quail before her; yet, in truth,
I never heard her charged with treachery.

FOURTH LORD. They are but nursery tales, Sir, doubt it not,
She rules her land in wisdom, will not wed,
Wears a strange dress, and so our gossips make
An ogress of her.

FIRST LORD. Those, at least, who praised
Her beauty did not lie.

THIRD LORD. Yet, in good sooth,
In Gunter's place I'd choose another wife.

FOURTH LORD. I never saw a fairer queen than she,
Nor one more full of dignity and grace;
How far doth she surpass our own Gudrun.

THIRD LORD. Prince Sigurd does not think so.

FIFTH LORD. Nor do I.
Brunhilda is most noble, but her mien
Is proud and scornful; she was born to rule,
To guide her heroes through the storms of war,
And wage an equal voice with mighty kings
In council chambers. She will never brook
The tameness of our women; mark my words,
If Gunter wins her, she will rule us all.

FOURTH LORD. Yet sovereignty becomes her, strength itself
Looks in her form like grace, her very pride
She wears as monarchs wear a wonted crown,
And all we praise and blame in her appears
Moulded to one majestic symmetry.
FIFTH LORD. But Gudrun's eyes are mild, her form is bright
With the unconscious grace of maidenhood,
Timid and tender; strong, but with the strength
That springs from love, the yearnings of her heart
Are for obedience not for rule, and this
I count a woman's virtue, that she choose
Wisely her lord, and then submit in all.
THIRD LORD. Her choice of Sigurd has been wisely made.
SEC. LORD. What say you to the mighty Queen, my lord?
OLD LORD. A cloud of dreams o'ercomes me as I gaze
Upon her face, forgotten memories
Awake within me, tales of other days,
The forms of buried heroes and of kings
Throng in upon me; doubts arise in me
If that indeed be Hagen, and these kings
Gunter and Sigurd, or if now I sit
In Hialmgunnar's court, and see his sons
Sharing the banquet.
SEC. LORD. Hialmgunnar fell
With all his sons some three score years ago.
OLD LORD. Ay, 'twas a winter evening; fold on fold,
The clouds rolled up across the western sea,
And we pressed hard on Agnar; few his men
And worn and far from succour; vows we paid
To Odin and the wonted sacrifice,
And many signs were granted. To the shore,
Wrapt in deep darkness, down the rugged ways,
'Twixt rifted cliffs, o'er spiked rocks and stones
That slipped, and rolled, and thundered to the sea,
Wildly we hurried. Fierce the onset was,
Then crashed good swords on splintered helms and shields,
While close beside us growled the angry sea.
Forwards we pressed, but manfully they stood.
And foot to foot we fought, and shield to shield
In the thick darkness, till a sudden gleam

Of moonlight pierced the clouds, and far and wide
I marked the seething waves, and on the shore
The wilder surge of men, and then again
The whole was hid in darkness. On my sword
I leaned by him I'd slain, waiting to catch
A sound of guidance from the angry fight,
And gazed upon the clouds, and there I saw
A little rift that widened, and a star,
And there, I think, amid the piled clouds
I saw the very face that now you see,
Bright in the moonlight, with a golden helm
Upon the golden hair, and on the arm
A golden shield, but all the rest was dark.
Awhile she paused, and then that noble face
Was touched with pity, such as heroes feel
When singers tell the tale of Helgi's death,
And sweeping downwards to the riddled throng,
Breasting the clouds she vanished from my sight.
But Hialmgunnar fell with all his sons
And heroes on the shore ere break of day.

BRUNH. All hail, great Sigurd! noble Gunter hail!
Hail, mighty Princes, and renowned lords!
All hail! and welcome to Brunhilda's hall!

SIGURD. If from the green banks of the distant Rhine
With all the choicest of our train we come,
'Tis not to prey on peaceful lands, or seek
A sudden cause for bloody arbitrement,
Nor to behold your beauty and your power,
Though these might well repay a longer way;
Not as mere idle gazers do we come,
But as firm friends who fain would knit the band
Of friendship to a closer dearer tie,
Therefore with joy again I fill the cup
And cry: all hail, great Queen! Brunhilda hail!

BRUNH. Oh! listen sister, all will yet be well.

ODDRUN. May gracious Nornen grant it.

BRUNH. Hush! he speaks.

SIGURD. What need have I to tell these Princes deeds?
Their names are on your lips, your ears have drunk
The story of their praises, for it seems

That mine have reached you. In our wayward youth
We rode on venturous paths, and snatched the wreath
Of fame from danger's brow to grace our own,
We wore our honours carelessly, nor sought
For aught beyond the rapture of the fight
And noble praise beside the festive board;
But men think otherwise, they fain would leave
A lasting monument to coming time,
A noble purpose nobly wrought, a deed
To joy all future ages, which our sons
May gaze on as a wonder, and enjoy
As a great heritage, and so we four
Have formed a mighty league, which Gunter rules
As Odin rules the gods who yet are free,
We are the props and bulwarks of his throne,
Not less but greater by the weight we bear
Of true and free submission. Mighty Queen,
Our work is almost perfect, wealth and might
We have in fullest measure, wisdom rules
And strength obeys; one thing is wanting yet,
A noble queen to walk among our lords
In the pure dignity of womanhood,
From whom may spring a mighty line of kings,
Worthy the noble past, and strong to tame
The stubborn future. Hence, as it beseems
The greatest woman of the age to crown
Its greatest work, and such you doubtless are,
Transcendent in your beauty, as we see,
In wisdom and in might surpassing all,
We come to woo you to return with us
To lordly Worms, as Gunter's happy bride.

BRUNH. (aside to Oddrun) What did he say?

ODDRUN. He said as Gunter's bride.

FIRST LORD. See how her eyes flash.

SEC. LORD. Mark her scornful brow.

FOURTH LORD. Her breast swells high, as if her rage could find
No fitting vent in words.

THIRD LORD. She is a fiend.

OLD LORD. She is of those that stand by Odin's throne,
'T were best not move her further.

FIFTH LORD. Hark! she speaks.
BRUNH. Sigurd, I drank the wisdom of your words,
The last died in the echoes of the hall.
SIGURD. Great Queen, I bid you join our mighty league—
BRUNH. (aside) Ill omened league that's knit with broken oaths.
SIGURD. I bid you come and share great Gunter's name,
His wealth, his honours, and our lasting love.
BRUNH. (aside) That kites would mate with eagles is not strange,
Since they have lured the noblest from his nest.
SIGURD. His lands are broad and rich, his name is great,
And we, his friends, are bold, and strong, and true.
BRUNH. (aside) How shall firm faith be built on perjury?
SIGURD. Great Queen, we wait your answer.
BRUNH. Good my lord,
Though such a jest were bitter and ill timed,
Unworthy your great name, unworthy me,
I trust you do but jest, for if you speak
In very sooth, then have you done a deed
So dark, so hideous as to blear the light
Of all your glories, and to lame the tongues
Of those that praise you. Fafnir, when he lay
Smeared with his father's blood upon his gold
In dragon-guise, looked fairer than your fame
Shall show to future ages. Good my lord,
Why would you sell the glories of your youth
At such a price? why barter a fair name,
Bright with ancestral glories hardly earned,
Raised by great deeds that you yourself have done
Into a spell to rule the hearts of men,
For an eternal infamy?—My lord,
I trust you did but jest!
SIGURD. Lady, your words
Amaze me; were my deeds so falsely told
That I was charged with lack of courtesy?
BRUNH. Did you speak sooth?
SIGURD. Ay, lady, on my word,
By all the gods—

BRUNH. Nay, Sigurd, do not swear,
For none of all the gods will note an oath
So shameless, but the demons and the elves
That hate you for the Nibelungen hoard
May weave it to a snare to catch your feet;—
Your oaths are vainer than a woman's sighs,
They are the jest of all the listening gods;
Their jest, and yet their sorrow.—Pray, my lord,
Of your great courtesy, come here awhile
And speak with me apart.

(Sigurd and Brunhilda advance to the front of the stage.)

Here, face to face,
And eye to eye, look on me. I appeal
From Sigurd dwelling in Giuki's house,
To Sigurd as he came from Fafnir's death,
To him who swore from him who mocks at oaths;
Great Sigurd, noble Sigurd, great and good,
That Gunter, the poor, empty, puppet king,
Thy feeble copy, and base portraiture,
Asks for my hand, for mine, Brunhilda's hand,
How shall I answer him?

SIGURD. Most mighty Queen,
Your words are wild and riddling, as I spoke
I speak again in pure and simple truth.

BRUNH. Speak not of truth; how shall I answer him?

SIGURD. Grant him his suit.

BRUNH. And this is Odin's son,
Alas! that nobleness should thus decay,
And the great pride and glory of the world
Turn out at last a piece of gilded dross,
Alas! for those that put their trust in him;
Nay, my good lord, go to your new found friends,
I will not vex you more.

(Sigurd and Brunhilda return to the table.)

GISELHER. See, now they part.

HAGEN. Her mien is changed, but she is calm again.

BRUNH. Prince Sigurd told your errand to my court,
But I would hear it from his master's lips,
What says King Gunter?

GUNTER. Truly did he speak
The very thought and purpose of my heart.
BRUNH. Then take your answer: May your sunny Rhine
With its green meadows and emblossomed towns
And all that them inherit be accursed,
From age to age may fierce-eyed war dwell there
Mid ruined towns and blazing palaces,
Since honour with dishonour there did mate,
And brightest fame with blackest treachery.
Now for this bridal; know that I have sworn,
And I at least will keep my oath, that none
Who knows the name of fear shall lead me home,
None but the greatest, noblest, and most brave
Shall ever wed Brunhilda. This I swore
By such an oath that the assembled gods
Gazed on each other in a blind dismay,
Thor grasped his useless thunder, Ziu blanched,
And the firm props of Odin's awful throne
Shook at the echo of my words; then he,
The mighty Father, rising from his place
Nodded approval. Judge, are you the man
To teach her heart submission who was firm
And did not tremble mid the trembling gods?
Methinks the eldest of Giuki's sons,
The pigmy offspring of a mongrel race,
Might well content him with a lesser bride
Than the god-born Brunhilda. Go your ways,
Build up your league with cunning, live and move
Amid the changing shadows of the world,
But leave me here among my northern rocks
To keep my faith unsullied till I die.
HAGEN. (aside) Let those who mock Giuki's House beware
Of craft that measures strength and uses it.
GISELHER. Truly she counsels wisely, such a bride
Would bring more strife than comfort to your hearth.
SIGURD. Wildly she raves, but yet there is a touch
Of nobleness in all her erring words;
That were a breast to suckle mighty kings
So it were truly won, but as indeed
That may not be, let us depart in peace.

HAGEN. Nay, let us tame the she-wolf; not from love
But very spite, I fain would bend her neck
Unto the yoke, and force the haughty queen
To sit by Gunter's side and nurse his babes.
What, shall a woman daunt us with her tongue?
GUNTER. We cannot take your answer, haughty Queen;
None but the greatest, noblest, and most brave
Shall lead you home in triumph;—be it so.
Even for so much do we account ourselves,
For where within the compass of the Earth
Are three such heroes linked as guard our throne?
BRUNH. They are the tower on which the pigmy stands;
He cries:—'I'm great, I overlook the world',
Because he's climbed a turret, and his head
Grows dizzy with his grandeur; for my part,
I scorn to climb your turret. As I stand,
I see the stars circling above my head
In everlasting courses,—see the sun
Rising and setting on this changing earth,
And am not giddy; stand upon my feet
And yet outsee you, Gunter, on my life,
See through and through you, know you as you are,
A little man raised above greater men
By chance of kingly title and by means
That better not the user; they are strong,
So you are great. What can it profit me
That these your men are mighty? Will their force
Strengthen your arm? their wisdom rule your thought?
Shall Hagen wed me?
HAGEN. (aside) Mighty Thor forbid.
BRUNH. Or will great Sigurd lead me by the hand
Into his bridal chamber?—Nay, the king
Will hold me at his pleasure: I reply
My heart obeys the hero not the king.
GUNTER. I have sat still, Brunhilda, all this while
That you have baited me with bitter scoffs,
For love stood here beside me with her hand
Upon my lips, and gazing on your face
I only saw the beauty not the scorn,
Now I arise, and cry as foe to foe,

Since foe you will be;—put me to the proof,
Call from your train a hero, let him stand
Before me, and the difference shall be tried
Between us by the arbitrement of war.

BRUHH. So says King Gunter, but not so say I;
My men may keep my castles and my land,
But my pure honour and my plighted troth,
aside (Ah! honour outraged, plighted troth despised!)
I put not in their keeping; these I hold,
Under the high protection of the gods,
With my own arm; and yet there is a man
On whose unshaken strength I dare rely,
Will Gunter meet him? Not within my train,
And yet not far is he; I think my voice
Can reach him, yet I know not. Near and far
He seems; will Gunter meet him?

GUNTER. Doubt it not,
Name him, and sword to sword and shield to shield,
For life and death this battle shall be tried.

BRUNH. Prince Sigurd is my champion!

SIGURD. Mighty Queen,
It may not be; send me against your foes
Unto the utmost limits of the Earth
And I obey you; name some monstrous deed
To chill the blood of heroes at the thought,
And it is done, but this I cannot do.

BRUNH. The Prince's tongue is ready; he will give
A world of golden vows, but not one deed,
One little deed to save his soul alive.
I have no message to the farthest pole,
What foes I have are seated in this hall,
And, good my lord, I ask no monstrous thing,
I only seek to lean upon your strength,
I bid you stand between me and despair.

SIGURD. This Gunter is my king; he is my friend,
Companionship in many arduous deeds,
High help and service rendered have become
A bond of faith strengthened by solemn oaths,
Therefore I may not meet him shield to shield.

BRUNH. Come hither, Sigurd.

(Sigurd and Brunhilda advance to the front of the stage.)

Who, in all the world,
Seems vilest to you?

SIGURD. He who breaks his oaths.

BRUNH. I will absolve you from your oaths; go forth,
Be great after your fashion; fill the world
With wondrous tales of great and worthless deeds,
And sudden bursts of useless nobleness;
Be, if you will, a comet not a sun,
I will not chain you to a court, nor say
The great were born to rule and bless the world;
Your fancy be your guide, though not the best,
I'll not complain. Go to your stranger friends,
Nay, if you will, seek in the land you love
A bride to please your fancy, who will sit
And gape at the strange story of your deeds
Nor seek to share them. But, my noble lord,
First free me from King Gunter's loathsome suit,
Not for my sake but for your honour's sake,
Let me have leave here in my land alone
To doze away a poor unfinished life,
Viewing in dreams the glories of the past,
And all that might have been and will not be.

SIGURD. Lo! I have sworn by every highest oath
To aid my lord King Gunter in his suit,
With all my powers of head, and tongue, and hand.
I who dare all things dare not break my oath,
And will not soil my soul with perjury.

BRUNH. Thou wilt not soil thy soul with perjury?

SIGURD. Not for the might of Odin.

BRUNH. (after a long pause.) Nay, look there,
What dost thou see?

SIGURD. The sparkling waves that break
On the dark rock.

BRUNH. What more?

SIGURD. The birds that rest;
Rising and falling on the heaving wave.

BRUNH. Methinks I see two lovers standing there,
With glowing eyes, and breasts that wildly heave
Responsive to the music of the sea.

SIGURD. I cannot see them.
BRUNH. Listen! what is that?
Dost thou hear nothing?
SIGURD. Nothing but the waves,
And now and then the distant seamew's call.
BRUNH. Methinks I hear a sweet but distant sound
Of voices broken by excess of joy,
The mingled names of Odin and of Thor,
Deep vows of love and solemn promises;
An oath was sworn.
SIGURD. 'T was but the empty sound
Of the sea breezes.
BRUNH. Ay; an empty sound.
(aside after a pause) I see it now, with lying charms and spells
His sense is dazzled, yet his heart is true;
Shall not I break his sleep who once broke mine?
(to Sigurd) Alas! my lord, how greatly art thou fallen
From the high glory of thy matchless youth,
Dim are the eyes that used to be so bright,
And the clear thought confounded. Woe is me
To see thee thus, not for thy sake or mine,
Though I, that weep not, well might weep for both,
But for the glorious future that is lost
And the vain dreams of Odin. Look on me,
Is all the past extinguished? can it lend
No ray to light thee past the yawning grave
That gapes before thy feet?
SIGURD. Your words are strange,
I cannot piece them into thought, and yet
They fall like distant music on my ear.
BRUNH. O Sigurd! look upon me once again,
Perchance some thought may quicken. Canst thou read
No traces of a long forgotten past
Within my eyes? Have then my lips no charm?
Is all the cunning of my words too dull
To wake the memories that surely lie
Hid in thy soul? Alas! that they should sleep.
SIGURD. My thought is troubled, joyous memories,
Bright but confused, awake within my heart,
Like the broken music of forgotten dreams.

Perchance in Berchta's dwelling ere my birth
I held your hand in mine, or on my sleep
You came, with summer-days and budding flowers,
And early hopes of strife and victory.
You seem a part of brighter, better things
Than aught my life afforded, yet a part
Of all my life; I know not what you are.

BRUNH. Then fight my battle; yonder sits the king
And here am I. Does not thy heart confess
My might the greater? Do not all thy thoughts
Vibrate beneath my words, e'en as a harp
Struck by a skilful player? As I speak
The dewy freshness of the spring, the light
Of morning, the exultant might of youth
Descend upon thee. What can Gunter do?
His might is of the earth, but I will hold
Thee, O my Sigurd! with a holier tie.
Make then thy choice between us.

SIGURD. It is made.

BRUNH. (to the table) Sigurd shall fight my battle.

HAGEN. Now, my lord,
Shall we not need our swords?

SIGURD. Most gracious Queen,
It may not be. Your words have moved my heart
E'en to its lowest depths, have swayed my soul
As none before has swayed it.—Were I free—
Well, well, that boots not. I have sworn an oath,
And I will keep it.

BRUNH. Death is in that oath;
Sigurd, my life and hope are in thy hand,
And thine are in my keeping. Trust them not.
Alas! that thou shouldst wrangle with thy friend
And make thy foe thy keeper. Good my lord,
Why art thou so enamoured of thy death
That I in vain must pray thee but to live?

SIGURD. To all who walk upon this sunny earth
There is a grave appointed, and a day
When they shall fold their hands and lie therein,
And caution skills not. Therefore, while we stand
Within this little spot of light between

The darkness of what has been and shall be,
I count him wise who does not strictly weigh
The chance of coming ills, but does the deed
That lies before him with a single heart
Undaunted by the future, and stands firm
On the fixed purpose that he has conceived,
As on a rock that shifts not with the tide,
Holding his word above the waves of chance,
And loving it more dearly than his life.
Therefore, in spite the wisdom of your words
And all their echoes in my heart, great Queen,
I cannot fight your battle.

(Sigurd returns to the table.)

BRUNH. (aside) All their arts
Could only blind him, could not lower his soul;
That still rings true, and now the rest is mine.

GISELHER. She has not gained him.

HAGEN. Time and tide will show.

BRUNH. Then be my arm my honour's only guard;
Along the woodland ways to Isenstein
Came many lovers trooping; where are they?
Where Gunter too shall be when next the sun
Purples the western wave. Soon as the light
Of morning dimly dawns across the hills,
Prepare to meet me in the castle court
In warlike games. Then, if indeed your arm
O'ermasters mine, I follow at your beck,
A bondslave, nay, a wife, as you may bid,
But if you fail, then look to it, your life
Shall pay the peril of the enterprize.
Thus only may Brunhilda's hand be won.
Are you content King Gunter?

OLD LORD. (kneeling to Gunter) Good my lord,
For nine and fifty years I've served your House,
Since Hialmgunnar fell beside the sea,
Have shared your dangers, by your side have fought
And by your father's; yet in all this time
I never craved a boon for service done,
But now a boon! a boon! my sovereign liege.

GUNTER. What would you have?

OLD LORD. O! meet her not in arms,
She is not of the Earth, O! meet her not.
HAGEN. What says the dotard?
OLD LORD. (rising) Youthful folly mocks
Wisdom's dull livery, hoary headed age,
Such jests are seemly; you may scoff at me,
But O! forbear to sell your soul to death,
When your great uncle fell amid the fight,
'T was she that slew him.
HAGEN. Agnar cleft his helm.
OLD LORD. 'T was she that bent his neck to meet the blow,
And led his gory soul to Odin's feast.
HAGEN. His coward heart is crazed by fear and age.
OLD LORD. When did I flinch when swords were drawn, or cry
Hold in the rush of onset? Though your arm
O'ermasters mine, my heart is stanch and true
E'en as your own, Prince Hagen. I have stood
Unshaken by your side amid the crash
Of battle, gaining less by victory.
But now that you would tread the path of death,
I bid you pause before the angry gods
Come forth to meet you in their rage, for who
Shall dare to step between them and their wrath.
BRUNH. What says King Gunter? Has his love grown cold?
Or does he take me for a village maid
Who fears to think her thought, and dares not call
Love love and hatred hatred? Such I scorn.
If that I loved, I should not fear to say
I love, nor blush to say this man I love,
Knowing my heart can only yield to him
Who is most worthy. Such I count you not.
But, if you dare to risk the chance of arms,
I hold you worthy honour, worthy death,
And will balk your purpose. Therefore choose;
Give up your suit and tarry here awhile
As welcome guests, and then return again
In peace and friendship to the walls of Worms,
Or take your chance, and perish.

GUNTER. Mighty Queen,
If that I paused, I did not pause in doubt,
But as when warriors listen to a tale
Told by some skilful singer of the gods
Or some great hero of the ancient world,
After he stops, a silence fills the hall,
And each repeats the cadence of the strain
In silence, and the story to his heart,
And would not break the music of high thoughts
With lower talk; e'en so I sat entranced
By the full music of your words, and then
One of my train, whose age and noble deeds
Demanded hearing, knelt before my feet
Telling a wondrous tale that may be true,
And this delayed my answer. You have said
None but the noblest man in all the world
Shall lead you home, and that I am not he;
It may be so, I cannot tell, at least
I would not vaunt my deeds, but this I know
You are the noblest woman in the world,
And I must love the noblest. Never yet
Did I refuse a contest, and with joy
I trust my future to the chance of arms
Seeing so fair a prize. So, noble Queen,
Your challenge is accepted. If I fall,
I fall without dishonour, by your hand,
And if I live, your bitter words shall turn
To sweetness, and the interchange of vows.

BRUNH. So be it then, since you will not be warned
Whom death bewitches in the guise of love.

(Exeunt Brunhilda, Oddrun, Maidens, and Attendants.)

GUNTER. See, as the moon amid the circling stars,
She moveth onward mid the maiden throng.

(Exeunt all but Sigurd, Hagen, Gunter, and Giselher.)

GISELHER. My mind misgives me much, I would my lord
You had refused this challenge.

SIGURD. We may still,
I think, avoid it.

GUNTER. Nay, I would not so.
My heart beats high to meet her, and methinks

Life never seemed so precious dear as now
When I may wage it as the gage of love,
And should I live till Fenrir breaks his chain,
I surely should not find a nobler death,
Nor one less bitter to me. All my blood
Streams in hot floods of rapture to my heart
At her approach, I tremble at her name,
And till I clasp that heaving breast to mine,
And quench this flame of love upon her lips,
I cannot rest, except within the grave.
Yes, noble Sigurd, you indeed may smile;
I too have smiled to see your eyes light up
When Gudrun glanced upon you as she passed,
And marvelled that a maiden's voice could make
A hero's pulses wildly ebb and flow,
Now, Sigurd, even as you love Gudrun
I love Brunhilda; wherefore do you start?

SIGURD. I cannot tell, but as you spoke my heart
Shuddered, an indistinct and distant woe
From the dim future seemed to lean, and seize
With unrelaxing grasp my thread of life,
Breaking it here. I felt as if my soul
Were burdened with a dark, unspoken curse
Which through my words and actions works itself
Into a horror to appal mankind.

GISELHER. O! let us go; some evil harbours here,
And you, O brother! are in love with death.

HAGEN. What shall he flee and break his plighted word?

GUNTER. Nay, I must meet her.

HAGEN. If you do you die,
You must not meet her.

GUNTER. Ay and no in one!

SIGURD. How do you rhyme your 'must not' with your 'must'?

HAGEN. Sigurd shall meet her.

SIGURD. I! It may not be.

HAGEN. Here brooding on the confines of the world
Where the dark forms of winter and of night
Crowd on the summer and the joyous day,
Holding as 't were an outpost of the Earth,

It well may be that she has learned to gaze
Into the awful darkness unappalled.
Thus, fathoming the secrets of the deep,
She holds its might in keeping, clothes herself
In its unconquerable power, and lures
Heroes to death by might of hidden charms.
E'en now she sits low brooding in her tower,
Or steals along the borders of the sea
Plucking its terrors, slowly weaving them
With formless horrors of the baleful night
Unseen to an unutterable charm
Boding the death of Gunter. Should he meet
Her spirit-aided might himself unarmed,
'T were little wit. Let Sigurd take his place,
Then shall her baffled curses break, like clouds
Whose fiery wrath falls quenched upon the sea.

GUNTER. How may this be? His face she knows and mine,
We are unlike in feature and in form.

HAGEN. Our mother on the night before she died
Beckoned me forth from out the glittering throng
Into the lonesome darkness of the wood,
And there she gave into my secret charge
The charms she wrought in silence and in woe
Unutterable, forcing me to swear
By oaths that none beside may swear and live,
Never to use them till the utmost need
Lowered o'er our House, and now the day has come,
The day that she foreboded now has come,
Not by my fault, for from the first my voice
Was waged against this venture, but I bear
The countercharm to all Brunhilda's charms,
And I will teach you how to change your shapes
So perfectly that none save you alone
Shall know the borrowed guise.

GISELHER. If this be so,
Well may we laugh at danger.

SIGURD. For my part,
I do not love these dark and hidden arts.
From the primeval ages there hath been

Unceasing war between the mighty Powers
Of light and darkness, and our little world,
Bounded on all sides by their warring realms,
Subject to both, is still their battle ground.
And man alone hath right of choice; he sees
Darkness and light, can stretch his little hand
To the high gods, or link his puny strength
To those who beard them in eternal hate.
O! let us battle for the gods, our lives
Are but of yesterday, and in a few
Fast fleeting years again we pass away,
We know not whither, leaving but a name
That likewise passeth from the minds of men,
And all shall be as if we had not been.
What skills it then to add a month or two
Of joy or sorrow to so short a life?
To grasp a petty gladness, or to leave
A pigmy cup of pain that should be ours
Untasted when we go? But this, methinks,
Is a full harvest for our little deeds,
A meed for gods that even man may earn,
To say I died unconquered in the ranks
Of Thor and Odin; choosing, thus I chose
Death for their sake rather than peace and joy,
Gifts from their foes by spells and sorcery.

HAGEN. Thus speaks Prince Sigurd, bearing at his side
The charmed sword that none but he can wield.

SIGURD. My sword was Odin's gift; its might is his.

HAGEN. Yet might is might, however it be gained.

SIGURD. The Powers of evil never freely give,
But giving, gain the taker with the gift.

HAGEN. I told you she had gained him, giving nought.

SIGURD. What say you?

HAGEN. Nay, I spoke to Giselher.

SIGURD. What did he say?

HAGEN. I said that oaths were oaths,
Friendship was friendship, and a man a man,
And that Brunhilda's voice was wild and sweet,
And so goodnight Prince Sigurd.

SIGURD. Still I find
No answer to the riddle.
HAGEN. Atli's realm
Is great as that of Gunter.
GUNTER. Giselher,
Your heart is tender, when you come to Worms
And find sweet Gudrun sitting there alone,
Searching with eager eyes the empty north,
O! break it gently to her. Tell her first
That I am dead, and when she sighs his name,
Then touch his failing lightly, speak of death,
Say not at once that Sigurd broke his oaths,
And that he sits rejoicing on my grave
With golden haired Brunhilda whom I loved,
But say he died, and dying bid her tend
Her roses, blending still sweet thoughts of him
With all their fragrance; though it be a lie,
Say the brave heart was faithful to the end,
For if you open up before her eyes
This dark abyss of crime and treachery,
And show her what her Sigurd really was,
Then, in her madness, will she fill the air
With such a cloud of curses that the gods
Cannot sit still in Asgard, but will rise
And break the flowery path before his feet
To sudden desolation.
SIGURD. What has brought
Such dark suspicions on me?
HAGEN. I have shown
The rugged way to safety. As it seems
You are too tender-footed for the rocks,
Well then, farewell Prince Sigurd.
SIGURD. I have said
I fear to wrong the gods with sorcery.
HAGEN. Fear rather to enrage them, if you mock
Their might by perjured oaths.
SIGURD. Alas! I see
No outlet from this cunning net of crime,
Shut in on all sides, howsoe'er I choose,
My deeds must needs be hateful in their sight.

HAGEN. One man I know is hateful to the gods,
And to mankind, and to the Nether Powers,
And that is he who swears and breaks his oath.
GISELHER. Have you not told us, you who now make light
Of all your oaths, a thousand times, that this
Was more than valour, more than fame, to hold
Firmly in death itself our plighted word?
'For this', you said, 'binds into solid rock
'The ever shifting quicksands that we tread,
'This life of chances. This', you said, 'shuts out
'The storms of passion from the seeds of love,
'Giving them space to grow; it finds a place,
'E'en in the very flame and rage of war,
'For pity and compassion; this alone
'Can be the basis of a noble life'.
And this is just what Sigurd will not do.
GUNTER. From this day forth the brightness of your fame
Shall wear the lurid hue of perjury.
HAGEN. You grow the very monster of the time,
Disgrace and glory blended. E'en the praise
That none can choose but pay you, will but throw
A stronger light upon your treachery.
'All things he dared, except to keep his oath,
'In all was strong, except to help his friend',
So men will say,—'What shall we call his name?
'Most shameful glory, glorious infamy,
'A firmset rock, yet changeful as the wave,
'A tower of steel that veered with every breeze,
'A strength that none could trust, a maiden's will
'Set in a hero's frame, a weakness masked
'In matchless strength;'—I name them all in one
Saying:—Farewell Prince Sigurd!
SIGURD. You have bent
My will to yours. Whatever come of this,
Though I must bear it, I am free of guilt;
Not willing what you would, I do your will,
In darkness clinging firmly to the oaths
I lightly swore, but will not lightly break.
HAGEN. Now once again I read within your face
The hero all unblotted.

(Exeunt Sigurd, Gunter, and Giselher.)

HAGEN. Thus have I gained my purpose; if he falls,
We shall return the greater not the less,
For now his fame outshines our lesser light.
And if he wins, the gain will still be ours,
Brunhilda's land, her brother Atli's strength
Will form the northern bulwark of our realm.
My mother said Sigurd was doomed to be
Our lord or our destroyer, I have made
His might our servant and security.

**Scene II.** The same hall. Early dawn. Enter SIGURD.

SIGURD. Dark shadows of the night persuade my heart
That I should know this castle, and have sat
Within this hall in brighter, better days,
And Queen Brunhilda knew me. I can find
No clue to guide me; all is dark and dim,
And thoughts that stir behind the dusky veil
Have but the form of shadows. All my sleep
Was thick with horrors, divers woes were there
That went and came inconstant; broken sobs
Of passionate farewells, and cloven helms,
And useless shields, and struggles as of those
Who die ignobly. Only this I caught
From the tempestuous gulf of stormy sleep,
The one-eyed man who showed me where to lie
In wait for Fafnir stood beside my bed.
His face was sad and earnest, and his mien
Severe but not ungentle. With slow lips:
'Beware of broken oaths', he said and passed;
And others came that loved me, bending low,
With sadness in their faces, from their graves,
And still they sighed: 'Beware of broken oaths',
And passed, and as I woke, within my ear
The mournful murmurs of the restless sea
Took up the tale: 'Beware of broken oaths'!
And yet I loathe this business; oftentimes
The spells of evil things have greater power
Than we conceive of; in the sweets of gain

They hide the bitter poison of defeat,
And weave destruction out of victory.
Yet did I swear to Gunter, and behold
The very graves are opened, and the dead
Shake off the quiet use of silent sleep,
And pass athwart the darkness of my dreams
Bidding me keep my oaths.

(Enter Gunter and Hagen.)

GUNTER. Good day, my lord,
You are astir betimes, and yet your thoughts
Seem still to hold discussion with your dreams.

SIGURD. See, how the waves leap up against the rock
Like hounds upon the huntsman, and anon
Fawn circling round its foot. Indeed, my lord,
I think that I have watched this sight before.

HAGEN. This is a haunted castle, and the queen
Has doubtless brewed to-night her strongest charm
To shake the soul of Sigurd.

SIGURD. See, the mews
Whirl screaming from the darkness of the cliff
In snowy eddies through the joyous air,
Flashing the first beams of the rising sun
From off the argent splendours of their wings.

HAGEN. We trifle time, my lord, the sun is up.

SIGURD. All seems as bright, as strange, as fresh, as sweet
As are the dreams of childhood.

GUNTER. Good my lord,
If thus you linger sunk in reveries
All will be lost, Brunhilda is astir.
This may you ponder any summer morn.

SIGURD. Who knows if I shall ever watch it more.

HAGEN. Nay, if Prince Sigurd maunders like a girl,
'T were best throw up the game.

SIGURD. I am prepared;
Come let us try your spell—and yet—
Methinks this land is very beautiful.

(Exeunt Sigurd and Hagen.)

GUNTER. Ne'er did I see Prince Sigurd till to-day
Go lingeringly to war or warlike games;
It may be he was right, and yet in truth

Hagen's were weighty reasons. If he fails
He shall not die for me, but if he wins
Then shall I clasp Brunhilda in these arms.

(Enter Brunhilda.)

The freshness of the morning tend thy steps,
Great Queen, and every joy but victory.

BRUNH. Good my Lord Gunter, leave your hopeless quest
And let us part in peace. Last eve I spoke
In wrath, in haste you answered, but the night
With quiet wisdom stills our troubled thoughts,
And hasty boasts look pale and pitiable
In the clear light of morning. 'T were a poor
And childish pride to follow foolish words
In foolish deeds, 't is wise to let them pass
As worthless jests, and so I trust, my lord,
We meet and part as friends.

GUNTER. Most mighty Queen,
'T was not the drunken valour of a feast,
Nor an o'erweening pride that made me dare
To match with you in arms and set my life
Upon the peril of the enterprize,
But what I spoke, I spoke because I felt
That life was worthless wanting you; I came,
'T is love that bids me tell you all the truth,
Pārtly to win the dowery of your lands,
And partly prompted by a moodish whim
For strange adventures; seeing you, I loved,
I loved you only, and with all my heart,
And if you stood deserted and alone,
Compassed by dangers, hated and despised,
Yet would I take up arms against the world
To win your love, or perish at your feet.

BRUNH. Love is the only meed of love, they say,
And that I cannot give; take truth instead.
You grasp at hopeless chances; 't is decreed
That there is only one in all the world
Shall vanquish me in arms; you are not he.

GUNTER. The great adventure shows the fearless heart.

BRUNH. Not brave but mad is he who fights with fate.

GUNTER. 'T is wise to venture all things for the best.

BRUNH. Not always best is what we most desire,
Nor best for us what in itself is best.
GUNTER. Who, having seen the brightest joy of earth,
Would be content to live without its light?
BRUNH. The yearling babe upon its mother's arm
Stretches its hand and clamours for the moon,
But men observe the measure of their strength,
Nor seek to grasp the sceptres of the gods.
GUNTER. But all my soul is sick for thee, my heart
Pants for thy love, and claims it as its right.
BRUNH. Many there be that hunger in the world,
T' is hard to bear, but are they therefore fed?
GUNTER. Who would not rather fight for bread than starve,
Although a thousand heroes barred the way?
BRUNH. Fighting he falls, my lord, I say no more.
GUNTER. Then, if it must be, let me fall, and so
The pain be quicklier ended; should I leave
This high adventure and return alone,
The very children in the streets of Worms
Would point the finger at me, I should be
The butt of every passing jest, my name
Would grace the end of every gossip's tale,
And I myself should scorn myself. Methinks
Death were a fitter ending!
BRUNH. Good my lord,
Say I was pale and withered, crabbed and old,
And take my sweet companion, dear Oddrun,
King Atli's sister, as a fairer bride.
GUNTER. It may not be; I trust a better fate,
And so farewell until we meet in arms.
(Exit Gunter.)
BRUNH. Bring me my shield.
(Enter Oddrun and Attendants.)
ODDRUN. What, will he not be warned?
BRUNH. No; still he spoke of honour and of love,
And answered he would fight, and mocked at death
As if 't were nothing but a gossip's tale.
ODDRUN. He answered nobly as beseemed a king,
Yet had another answer pleased me more,
So it were not ignoble.

BRUNH. Yes; I fear
My gift of life may gall the wound it heals,
And my pure kindness vex his pride like scorn,
But yet he must not die—for Sigurd's sake.
ODDRUN. Nay, if the games were over, all were well.
BRUNH. What do you fear the issue? Can you doubt?
ODDRUN. Bear with me; since I see that Sigurd's sense
Is dazzled by a charm, the very rocks
Beneath my feet no longer seem so firm
As heretofore. If we could not rely
Upon the steadfast honour of his soul
Who is the very wonder of the Earth,
What shall we trust?
BRUNH. Still does his honour stand
Unshaken, mid the earthquake of his mind
Where all the past lies buried.
ODDRUN. Yet his eyes
No longer clearly see, his sense is dulled,
And when the noblest of great Odin's sons
Is shaken, what on earth can stand secure?
BRUNH. Awhile Grimhilda's evil spells have power
To blunt his sense, but not to shake his soul,
That still is true.
ODDRUN. Grimhilda? Who was she?
BRUNH. King Gunter's mother, one whose wayward will
Transgressed the wholesome bounds the gods have set
To human might and knowledge. Still she sought
To know the future, and by magic art
She gained some broken rays of fitful light
Which only made the darkness more obscure.
ODDRUN. Yet light is good, however it be gained.
BRUNH. Or light is good or darkness. In the night
We safely grope along, with outstretched hands
Feeling our way, or trusting those that lead;
Such is the life of those within the world
Who trust the gods, and move from act to act
Along the path of duty, faring well.
And light is good, such as the gods bestow
On whom they will, who seeing understand,
And tread with certain steps the sunny earth;

But knowledge gained by dark and hidden arts
Is wholly evil; 't is a broken light
Which mars the true proportions of the world,
And makes of firmset rocks that mark the way
Pale forms and flitting ghosts to fright the sense.
Such were her arts—Come bind my helmet on—
But we depend upon a firmer trust,
On the decision of the mighty gods
Who have decreed that none but Sigurd's arm
Shall ere o'ermaster mine. So all is well.

(Exit Brunhilda. Oddrun and Attendants stand at the window.)

FIRST ATTEND. Lo! through the court she moves, a second sun,
Flashing the sunlight from her golden shield.

SEC. ATTEND. King Gunter, dazzled by the glorious sight,
Stands lost in dreams.

THIRD ATTEND. See now she grasps the spear
And hurls it—far beyond the utmost mark.

FIRST ATTEND. Now comes King Gunter.

(A shout without.)

ODDRUN. Further than the queen's!
Allruling gods!

(A long pause. A shout without.)

Again King Gunter wins!

(A still longer pause. A shout without.)

And yet again. Great Odin, all is lost!

(Enter Sigurd as Gunter with Brunhilda; Hagen, Giselher, Lords, and Attendants.)

LORDS. Long live King Gunter!

BRUNH. Good, my lord your strength
Has broken mine; I am your slave, my lord.

SIGURD. My wife, great lady, and my honoured queen.

BRUNH. What matter if we call it wife or slave?
'T is but the name we change. The day is hot,
Will my great master give me leave to rest?

SIGURD. Farewell, my Queen. (aside) I would that she were free
And that my trunkless head scowled from the wall.

HAGEN. (aside to Sigurd) 'T was nobly played.

SIGURD. (aside to Hagen) 'T was basely played, my lord,
And such a play as you and I shall rue,
If there be any justice with the gods.
HAGEN. (as before) Come, come; you weigh your faults too carefully,
Shall heroes stumble o'er a grain of dust?
SIGURD. (as before) A little grain of dust may blind a man,
So that he stumbles headlong to his grave.
(Exeunt Sigurd, Hagen, Giselher, Lords, and Attendants.)
BRUNH. Go you too. Leave me.
(Exeunt Maidens and Attendants of Brunhilda.)
Vanquished and undone—
Lost—ruined—Can it be? His wife—his wife—
King Gunter's wife!
ODDRUN. Great sister, nerve thyself.
BRUNH. I bade you leave me; go nor hold discourse
With whom the gods betray.
ODDRUN. O! know thyself;
Let not thy great soul sink beneath the blows
Of fate and passion; whatso'er betide,
Be thou Brunhilda still!
BRUNH. O! doubt it not;
I am that same Brunhilda, Sigurd's wife,
Who now is sold to please King Gunter's lust;
I know myself, I learn the wretched part
That I must play, as harlot of the King.
ODDRUN. Thou art his wife.
BRUNH. Nay, that I cannot be,
For I am Sigurd's wife by interchange
Of every holy oath. Go thou thy ways,
And leave me to my shame.
ODDRUN. Whate'er thou art,
I will not leave thee.
BRUNH. What, a girl like thee
Will dare be true, here, in a lying world,
Ruled by the lying gods?
ODDRUN. O! tame thy rage,
The gods are swift to vengeance; dare them not.
BRUNH. What can they do to me that is undone,
That I should cloak their crimes in humble words,

Or fear to call them by their proper names,
And tell them how I hate their perjury?

ODDRUN. Hear not her madness, Odin.

BRUNH. Hear it all
Ye gods and slaves that crouch before his throne;
'T is true I sinned.—Great Odin bid me slay
Agnar, and give his foe the victory,
But when I gazed on Agnar, and beheld
His youth and fearless bearing, knowing well
That none of all the gods would take his part,
I paused, and sister, then I pitied him,
Whom none doth pity in my utmost need.
I dragged old Hialmgunnar by the hair
Through warring clouds, and hurled his trembling soul
At Odin's feet. Then rose the wrathful god,
Grasping his spear, and bid me leave his hall,
And mix with men, and wed; but with an oath
I seized on that great Might behind the gods,
Swearing that he I wed alone of men
Should know no fear, and Odin and the rest
Granted the boon and sealed it with an oath:
That none should wake me from my sleep but he
Who was the greatest hero of the Earth,
And this was Sigurd; and again they swore
That none but he should vanquish me in arms;
Now they are perjured, and again I cry:
A fool is he who puts his trust in them.

ODDRUN. Nay, in this riddling darkness let us trust
In them, for if they aid us not, indeed,
Orphaned are we, and outcast, and undone.

BRUNH. Insensate are the perjured gods and blind;
Was it ne'er told in Asgard, never heard
In their high counsels that by me alone
Can Odin's mighty son be perfected?
And if he fail them when the awful dawn
Of doom flames red and black athwart the sky,
Shall not the lofty halls of Asgard pass
In smoke and ashes, and this dædal world
Dip into darkness, while the chilly night
Of death enshades them all?

ODDRUN. O! let us trust
That Odin yet may find a sunny way
Out of these mists.
BRUNH. Trust thou in whom thou wilt,
But I, for my part, call the Nether Powers,
And stretch my hands imploring to the dark
And formless realms of Hel; on her I call!
Hear me, ye dark and evil working powers,
Feared by mankind, abhorrent to the gods,
I, Odin's daughter, call on Odin's foes
For vengeance, vengeance, vengeance on the heads
Of those that blinded Sigurd with their spells,
Of all that used the might of baleful charms
Against our bridal, or to bring about
This hideous bond with Gunter;—be their friends
As false as they have made my noble lord,
Short be their lives, ignoble be their deaths,
Not in fair fight, but by a traitor's hand,
Or racked by loathsome torture may they die,
Nor they alone; may all their children bear
My heavy curse, and perish from the Earth
By unexpected blows of sudden death,
To wail together in the house of Hel!
ODDRUN. O! stay thy curse, my sister, still the sun
May pierce the drifted clouds that shade our path
With murky darkness.
BRUNH. That can never be.
Yet wait; all is not over yet, I see
A ray of hope. The might of spells must pass,
And I shall meet with Gunter all alone
Within the bridal chamber; there again
Will I essay the chance of victory.

(Enter Gunter.)

GUNTER. My noble Queen, when shall we start for Worms?
Prince Sigurd has already ridden forth
To tell the story of our glad approach.
BRUNH. My lord, your will is mine.
GUNTER. Then let all haste
Be used for our departure. Happy thoughts
Leap gaily forward to the joyous bourn,

And chide the tardy hours with vain delay;
O! my Brunhilda, sunny are the woods
That we shall pass and bright with blossoming,
For Love has passed before us on our way
Waking the flowers, and sunny are the hills,
For Love has smiled upon them and they stand
Robed in rich golden lights and purple haze
To watch us passing southward to the Rhine,
The sunny Rhine, that laughs amid his rocks
To greet the passing pageant led by Love.
And ancient Worms shall clothe herself with joy
At news of our approaching, all her walls
And gloomy towers grow bright with crimson stuffs
And golden, rarely wrought with oaken wreaths,
To grace the double bridal.

BRUNH. Double? Who
Shall share with us the pomp of marriage rites?

GUNTER. Upon the self-same day that we are wed
Prince Sigurd leads the raven-haired Gudrun
Into his bridal chamber.

BRUNH. He?—Gudrun?
Prince Sigurd weds your sister? weds Gudrun?
It cannot be.

GUNTER. Why should it not be so?

BRUNH. Because Prince Sigurd is—

GUNTER. Well, what is he?

BRUNH. Unfit to wed your sister, and unfit
To share your trust—O! most of all unfit
To share the honours of my bridal feast.

GUNTER. Why most unfit?

BRUNH. You told me yesternight
He was your vassal; should a vassal wed
His prince's sister?

GUNTER. He too is a prince,
And noble service has he rendered me.

BRUNH. Noble, in sooth, the service must have been
To earn so high a recompense.

GUNTER. In truth,
Such service has he rendered, and Gudrun
Has been betrothed to him for many a day.

BRUNH. And he delayed the bridal till I came
To vex me with the sight, and whet his slow,
Sick appetite, cloyed by the fulsome sweets
Of love, with bitter insult, shame, and wrong
Done on a queen.
GUNTER. No queen on earth were shamed
By wedding Sigurd. Your high soaring pride
Checks at a fancied wrong. Come, smooth your brow,
On this one point I must not note your frowns,
My word is pledged that he shall wed Gudrun.
BRUNH. It shall not be.
GUNTER. Remember, mighty Queen,—
BRUNH. Ah! I forgot.—Forgive me, mighty King,
That I forgot to bear me like a slave,
That I forgot that all my might is gone,
And for a moment, played the mighty queen.
I will forget I ever was a queen,
And learn to bend my knee at your approach,
And how to bate my breath when you are near,
And how to gaze in reverence at your feet
Counting the very dust on which you tread
A sacred relic.
GUNTER. Why what words are these?
BRUNH. O! let them not displease you, mighty King,
My lips are still imperfect in the use
Of servile phrase, but use will come with time;
T' is but an hour ago that first they learned
To utter 'master'.
GUNTER. Rather teach them, dear,
The use of 'love'.
BRUNH. T' is pretty much the same,
But master is the older, firmer bond,
When the slave tries to flee, we have the lash,
When love grows cold, we can but bear the pain.
GUNTER. This pain, at least, thou wilt not have to bear.
BRUNH. It little skills to speak of what shall be;
But I had thought the raven-haired Gudrun
Should wed with Atli, great his kingdom is,
He is my foster-brother, and my heart

Is knit to his by many closest ties,
Give him your sister.
GUNTER. Nay, it cannot be,
Prince Sigurd has my word.
BRUNH. Then be it so.
(aside) O'er thy bright future lowers a nameless woe,
Moans jar the music, heroes gaze in dread
On corpses heaped upon a bridal bed.

# Act II.

**Scene I.** Worms. A gallery in the palace of Gunter leading to the apartments of Sigurd and the King. Night. Enter UTA.

UTA. She has the blessing, let her take the curse,
I will not bear it longer. 'In thy grave
'Hide it', she said, and died. I served her well;
Is not one life enough, one joyless life
Cursed by her purpose, till it grew a round
Of loathsome incantations? must I make
My grave a raging pit of angry fiends
Because she warred with Odin?—If she came
Out of the earth and cursed me?—Now they come
And grin upon me, when I sleep they sit
Upon my breast and choke me. In my grave,
Let me have rest, ye gods. Since Hagen wrought
This second wicked bridal, all the air
Has swarmed with fiends. Gudrun is Sigurd's wife,
Her mother's will accomplished; let her bear
The golden curse Grimhilda laid on me,
Let me have leave to rest.

(Enter Gudrun, and Page bearing a torch.)

Begone.

(Page places the torch in a socket. Exit.)

Come hither.

GUDRUN. Who art thou that comest,
Glimmering across the darkness, like a ghost?

UTA. Well may I wear the livery of the grave
Who long have held acquaintance with its gloom,
And I am dead, if life be hope, and joy,
And peace, and trust, and love;—long dead,—long dead;
And yet not dead, for surely when we die

We shall find peace, and I have none, I toss
From pain to pain, from weary thought to thought
Uneasily, and close beside my bed
Sits Recollection, humming hour by hour
The same old tale of unforgiven crime.
Alive, without one hope to star the gloom,
And dead, without the quiet of the tomb,

GUDRUN. But wherefore dost thou come to me? My soul
Is free from guilt, I have not done thee wrong,
Nor known, nor shared thy crime, nor passed thee by
With glad steps, heedless of thy withered hand
Outstretched, and eyes that thirsted for a dole.
Why then, O! awful speaker, dost thou mar
My bridal with thy presence, drawing me
By a most fearful summons, from the side
Of Sigurd, me, his bride of yesterday,
From the glad light and music of the feast,
To the chill presence of a living death?
Why choose this spot for the unhallowed tryste?
And stand with angry eyes and outstretched hand
Before my bridal chamber, like a curse
Suddenly clad in human form, to bar
The path of joy? What is thy guilt to me?

UTA. Hers was the guilt, and mine the punishment,
And thine the great advantage. All thou deemst
Dearest and best was bought by what I bear,
Art thou not Sigurd's wife?

GUDRUN. I am his wife.
Too late thou comest, if from the gloomy house
Of Hel thou risest to forbid the rites
Of marriage and to rob me of my lord.
Though thou shouldst call up ghastly sights of death
To rob the blessed summer of its warmth,
And craze the healthy sense of men with dread,
Thou canst not chill the kisses that have burned
Upon my lips, nor rob me of the joy
That I have tasted; I am his, he mine
Forever; come what may, the past is ours.

UTA. Heavy shall be the price of all thy joys.

GUDRUN. And if 't were death, yet are they cheaply bought.
But who art thou?
UTA. Dost thou not know me?
GUDRUN. Speak!
Art thou my mother's spirit? If thou art,
Fear not to tell me; love can vanquish dread;
And if I can but ease thee, mother dear,
And give thee peace and quiet in the grave,
Trust me, I will not shrink; or dost thou come
Though dead to bless my bridal? for I know
That it must glad thee wheresoe'er thou art
That I am Sigurd's wife. It was thy will.
UTA. It was her will.
GUDRUN. Her will; who then art thou?
UTA. Gudrun.
GUDRUN. Uta.
UTA. Uta I am, that wretched, wretched thing
That bore thee in her arms, and likewise bore
Thy mother at her breast; I loved you well
While I could love, and so for love's sake grant
I may have leave to die and rest in peace.
GUDRUN. Why, Uta, for love's sake, for love's sweet sake,
I would do much, and much for your sake too,
My good old nurse. But give you leave to die?
No, no; not yet. You still are strong and hale,
And you shall live, dear Uta, doubt it not,
To nurse my children, and to tell them tales,
The same old tales you used to tell to me,
About their father and his ancestors,
They shall not tease you as I did.—But why
Have you not come to see me all this time?
Where have you been? Indeed, you frightened me,
And I am half inclined to storm and scold,
But, O! dear nurse, I am so happy now.
UTA. So happy, happy! I have half forgot
The meaning of the word.
GUDRUN. What, ails you, nurse?
UTA. How my mind wanders. Happy, did you say?
Can you be happy?

GUDRUN. I am [illegible]'s wife,
O! more than happy.
UTA. Sigurd's wife? Art thou
The Queen Brunhilda that dost stand by me?
(kneeling) Have mercy, mighty Queen, we did thee wrong;
But O! behold these palsied hands; behold
These hollowed eyes, this weak and wasted frame;
It was not age—though I indeed am old,
Old, old, and lone—'t was woe that bent me thus,
Long gnawing pain, just meed of monstrous crime.—
There, there!—Take thou the ring.—It was thy ring—
Prince Sigurd's ring.
GUDRUN. Ye gods! Is this the wild,
Discordant raving of a frenzied mind?
Or does some awful secret leap to light
From out the gulfs of madness?
UTA. Work thy will,
None shall restrain thee now; the dreadful queen
Is dead, and I myself, by years and guilt
Unnerved, lie still, a piece of ocean wreck
Cast by the tide of time before thy feet.
GUDRUN. By Odin I conjure thee, tell the tale
Plainly, and hide it not in riddling words.
UTA. Torture me not Grimhilda. Can I stand
Alone against the gods? Avaunt sad ghost!
Did I not tell thee that her time would come
And she would crush us? If I were as thou,
I too could brave it boldly. Thou art dead.
She cannot break thy slumbers with the fierce,
Wild flashes of her angry eyes nor hound
Her fiends upon thee.
GUDRUN. Now the whole is clear,
Brunhilda planned the ruin of my lord,
My mother loved him well, I know; she saved
His life from danger doubtless—by a spell,
And Uta helped her, and the countercharm
Lies hidden in the tracing of the ring.
UTA. (rising) Thou shalt not keep it. Give it me again
And do thy worst. Where is she?

GUDRUN. Who?
UTA. The queen.
GUDRUN. Your eyes are dim, dear Uta, you are old,
And your mind wanders somewhat. You and I
Are all alone; the queen has not been here.
UTA. Where is the fatal ring?
GUDRUN. You gave it me.
UTA. O! give it me again.
GUDRUN. But if I should,
The first time that Brunhilda scowls on you
As you now thought she did, your heart will fail,
For you are weak with many years and griefs,
And you will give it her; and then?
UTA. Your House
Shall pass away, e'en as the morning mists
Pass when the sun ariseth.
GUDRUN. Let it then
Remain with me, but tell me all the tale.
UTA. Nay, if I did, vain were thy mother's care,
Vain were my life long anguish, all in vain
The darkness, and the terror, and the charm,
And if I spoke, I almost think the moon
Would sicken in the heaven, and the rock,
The solid rock on which the castle stands,
Shudder beneath my words. Fain would I tell
The bitter tale that parts my feeble age
From kindly dues of human fellowship;
The awful secret struggles in my heart
Convulsively. 'T will out to glaze the eyes
Of men with horror. Hush! I will not speak;
One knew it and is dead, and two still live
And know it, and must hide it in the grave;
And yet it shall be known. Alas! alas!
Such deeds will not be hid. The years pass by
Smoothly, it seems forgotten, all is well,
But when the years bring the appointed day,
The crime that was begotten in the night
Is born into the sunshine;—'t is not dead,
It will not die. So shall it be with us.
But not by me, ye gods, let the dark tale

Be known, the terror spoken, and the charm
So dearly bought frustated;—not by me;
Lest if, when wandering on with faltering steps
Through the vast, sunless regions of the dead
Whither I go, my joyless eyes should see
My sometime mistress, I must quail before
Her wrathful face averted, and pass on
Without a greeting, spite of all my pain.

GUDRUN. Take back the ring and let me go; I seek
To know no more. Why should thus much be told?
O! wherefore hast thou summoned from the tomb
Pale phantoms, wan with dread, and bid them pass
Across the golden sunlight of my youth
Blighting its flowers, until my bridal wreath
Appears a funeral chaplet, dusk and cold?
If that the future hide in her dark robe
Untold mischances, wherefore should we seek
To tear it open ere the time be come?
Why chill with woes that are not, and perchance
May never be, the full and living flood
Of rapture that runs coursing through our veins
In pulses hot with joy?

UTA. For Sigurd's sake,
And for the joy that sparkles in thine eyes,
The love that warms thy cheek, and for my sake
Most joyless and unloved, keep thou the ring
But do not ask its story. Hide it well
From all eyes, but from Sigurd's most of all,
And from the hapless queen. If it be hid,
All may be well.

GUDRUN. Trembling, I take from thee
The sacred charge too heavy for thine age,
To heavy far, I fear me, for my youth;
Speak on, I will obey thee.

UTA. 'T is enough.
I have no more to tell thee. Hide it well
And keep it well, for surely in that ring,
That little ring is locked Prince Sigurd's fate,
Your brothers' fate, Brunhilda's fate, your own.
So haste and hide it.

(Exit Gudrun to her chamber.)

UTA. Was it well to lay
So sore a burden on her tender youth?
I cannot tell. I am so old and weak,—
So very old. Ah me! I long for rest.

(Enter Gudrun.)

GUDRUN. Farewell, good nurse, now must I haste away.

UTA. Farewell, my child, with youth and beauty bright,
Seek thou the feast, the music, and the light,
I with slow steps that falter, through the gloom
Must darkly grope my way into the tomb.

(Exit Gudrun.)

Yet will I linger here awhile unseen,
For I would speak with Hagen ere I go.

(Uta conceals herself. Enter Hagen, Giselher, and Attendants with lights.)

GISELHER. Is all prepared? Are carpets spread and lamps
Lit in the bridal chambers?

ATTEND. Ay, my lord.

GISELHER. Then tell the king we wait his presence here.

(Exit Attendant.)

(to Hagen) 'T is a strange bridal truly.

HAGEN. Very strange.

GISELHER. Yestre'en Brunhilda lingered in the hall
Feasting beyond the middle of the night,
And ever as our brother rose to go
She bid the minstrels sing another lay;
Meanwhile Gudrun o'erwearied leaned her head
On Sigurd's shoulder, falling fast asleep.

HAGEN. Whether she slept I cannot tell, I know
She leaned on Sigurd's shoulder.

GISELHER. Yet the queen,
Ere yet the morning's grey was dashed with red,
Burst down upon the sleeping grooms, cried out
For hounds and horses, and with winding horns,
Attended by her maidens, sought the woods
Returning only to the evening meal.

HAGEN. Ay, and methinks her greeting of Gudrun
Was of the strangest.

GISELHER. That I did not see.

HAGEN. Why, the King brought her to the queen and said
'This is Gudrun,' she noted not his words,
But thought the hall was heavy, dark, and low;
'This is Prince Sigurd's bride', repeats the king,
The gilding of the wall she thinks is well,
The colours somewhat gaudy; waxing wrath
And louder, says the King, 'This is Gudrun,
'This is my sister.' Quickly turns the queen,
Veiling a world of scorn in humbleness,
Folding her arms and bending like a slave,
'What does my master's sister then command?'
Gudrun looked on astonished all the while,
As well she might, and Gunter bit his lip.

GISELHER. 'T is strange too that our brother should command
That none should watch upon the stairs to night.

HAGEN. So much is strange that did we canvass all
We should out-talk the night; but see, they come.

(Music. Enter Gunter, and Brunhilda, Oddrun, Lords, and Attendants.)

BRUNH. To-morrow with the earliest beam of dawn
Let the glad bugle call us to the chase,
And so good night.

(Exeunt Gunter and Brunhilda to their chamber.)

FIRST LORD. What, call you this a bride?

SEC. LORD. Ay, and a brave one who is like to spur
Her husband onward to heroic deeds,
Since he will find but little peace at home.

THIRD LORD. I said as much, my lord, at Isenstein.

FOURTH LORD. Like some wild, lovely creature of the woods,
But newly fallen in the hunter's snare,
She tries the utmost limits of her cage
With sudden springs and curvets; yet how fair,
How full of grace is her wild tamelessness.

(Music. Enter Sigurd, and Gudrun, Lords, and Attendants.)

GUDRUN. (to her maidens) Goodnight, and happy dreams attend on all,
Tuned to the silent music of the night,
Rest in sweet hope, and longing sweet as hope,
Till morning wake you to as sweet delight.

SIGURD. Come, love, you linger.
GUDRUN. Nay, I come. Goodnight.

(Exeunt Sigurd and Gudrun to their chamber. Oddrun, Giselher, Lords, and Attendants as they came.)

UTA. (advancing) Stay, Hagen; I must speak with thee alone.
HAGEN. What dost thou here? Why dost thou soil our feast
With thine ill omened presence?
UTA. 'T was the love
I bore, the service I have done thy House
That made my steps ill omened.
HAGEN. True have been
Thy love and service Uta. If my words
Were harsh, it was my temper, not my heart
That spoke them, the ill trick that mars my mood
And makes me seem most rough where I would be
Most gentle. Pardon it. But yet again
I ask, why dost thou come on such a day,
Against thy wont, into our palace hall?
UTA. Who then but I should come to such a feast?
HAGEN. Thine office is to wash and tend the dead,
'T was thine own choice, ill made, against my will.
UTA. But work is slack; is nothing here to do?
HAGEN. Such jesting ill befits the place and time,
Thy hoary head and me. Why art thou here?
UTA. Should not I bring a present to the bride?
HAGEN. Hush thy hoarse laugh, it grates upon my ear.
UTA. So do thine actions grate on Odin's eyes.
HAGEN. Are thine and thou so pleasing in his sight
That he has sent thee as his messenger?
UTA. Mine are as thine, but I am not as thou;
For age has sucked the blood from out my veins,
And pain has gnawed the marrow of my bones.
HAGEN. Am I a god to give thee back thy youth?
UTA. No; but thy deeds add torment to my age.
HAGEN. They are my deeds, and yet they hurt not me.
UTA. The crime that youth can lightly bear away
Weighs crushingly upon the neck of age.
HAGEN. Thou speakst of crime.

UTA. What? Shall I lie to thee?
Or dost thou do that which thou darest not name?
HAGEN. I dare do what I will, but will not call
My mother's deed, and mine, and thine a crime.
UTA. Bold as thou art, it seems thou dost not dare
To speak the simple truth to thine own heart.
HAGEN. Again I say, what converse you and I
Can hold together does not fit this place.
If thou must speak with me, then haste away
And I will meet thee straight beside her tomb.
UTA. Nay; here, here, here; for sure our intercourse
Is most unhallowed, and in all the world
There is no place so black with crime as this.
There Odin's son, beguiled by hellish charms,
Begets upon thy sister woe and death;
There Odin's virgin, his betrothed bride,
By him enslaved, lies clasped in Gunter's arms,
And what can she conceive except a curse?
This place is consecrate to shame and sin,
And this, this Hagen, is thy place and mine.
HAGEN. What is more sacred than a mother's will?
What nearer than a brother? I will guard
My House; let Odin guard his own. Have I
So glad a life, thinkst thou, so light a task
That thou must aggravate my fault and thine?
UTA. How? Aggravate our fault! What human tongue
Shall aggravate it? Have not heaven and hell,
Through the long changes of unnumbered years,
Fought for possession of this earth? and now
Hell is triumphant, and through thee and me.
HAGEN. Because hell offered more than heaven, I stood
For hell, and it has won.
UTA. But lo! the gods
Stretch out their hands to vex me, and the fiends
Mock at my prayers, and make my moans their scoff.
HAGEN. Of our free will we did my mother's will,
Now must we bide the outcome of our deeds.
UTA. Say; did she bid you, did I give consent
That you should seize Brunhilda, bend her neck
Beneath your yoke, and sell the spotless queen

To Gunter's loathed embraces? You have grown
Drunken with outrage. Was it not enough
That he was blinded, that his life was warped
From its high destiny, his purpose dwarfed
To suit your aims, his soul beguiled, his thought
Confounded utterly, but you must heap
Outrage on outrage, crime on crime, and mock
The gods in very wantonness?

HAGEN. We chose
The path we tread, and now we needs must on.
So narrow, rough, and giddy is the way
That if we pause we fall into the grave.

UTA. Accursed is the path on which we tread.

HAGEN. 'T was the first step determined all its course.
We made it freely, and must calmly take
What comes of it.

UTA. And what can come of it
But death and desolation?

HAGEN. If they come,
Then let us meet them firmly, not with sobs
And tears of vain repentance.

UTA. In thee lives
The spirit of thy mother and her race,
But not their craft. They did not fear the gods,
Nor did they mock their might with needless crime.

HAGEN. Did I propose this bridal? From the first
My voice was urged against it. They would go,
And so I went, saved Gunter's life that hung
Upon the balance. It is something yet,
Whatever come of it, that we have stood,
We men, and thwarted Odin's high design.

UTA. I shudder at the thought that lights thine eyes
With pride. Who shall prevail against the gods?

HAGEN. Sigurd is Odin's son, he has his sword;
My race is known to thee, I have their craft,
As yet we have the better of the game.

UTA. But 't is not over yet. O! do not think
These two shall dwell together, meet and part,
And never take each other by the hand,
And gaze into each other's eyes, and read

The whole wild tale of passion and of crime.
The hopes we have frustrated, and the plans
We thwarted shall arise, and rage and love
Join in one cry for vengeance, one wild cry,
Drowning all sense of pity, striking full
Upon the ear of death, O! in that day,
Beware of Odin's sword.

HAGEN. But Odin's child,
The petted darling of the gods, has got
A pretty plaything. He has drowned himself
In two bright eyes, a single kiss outweighs
All Odin's plans of fame and victory,
A little hand pressed slyly in the dark
Is more than empire. If Brunhilda frowns,
Gudrun shall smile; that is enough for him.

UTA. This love, this summer flushing of the blood,
Cannot endure, though for a while its sweet,
Strange fragrance thrills and lulls each raptured sense,
Yet it shall pass away from out his life,
E'en as the dew from off the grass, the bloom
From off the bough, the golden hues of morn
From off the cloud,—and then?

HAGEN. So shall the love
Brunhilda bears to Sigurd pass away.

UTA. Nay, to the awful nature of the gods
Another love is known that changeth not,
But mid the wreck of time and circumstance,
Remains unchanging.

HAGEN. Thus Brunhilda loves?

UTA. Ay, thus they love, for do not dream his love
Has perished utterly; although it sleeps,
It shall awake.

HAGEN. And Gudrun?

UTA. Sighs shall take
The place of kisses, sobs the place of sighs,
And tears that patter down upon the babe
Its father thinks his shame.

HAGEN. It cannot be.
Why, he has haunted her for months, grown sick
Upon a glance, outmewed the midnight cats

In loving praise of her, has waked o' night
And dreamed o' day, confounded eve and morn,
Sighed to the stars, and paled, and longed, and pined,
Until the dreadful lion grew as tame
As a girl's spaniel or a lady's ape.

UTA. Not so he wooed Brunhilda. Through the hall
He strode, and found her tranced in dreamless sleep,
He armed her armed. Beneath his gaze her eyes
Opened upon him, and upon their hearts
Love broke a revelation, and behold
Their souls stood naked in each other's sight,
And knew no shame.

HAGEN. Yet is Gudrun his wife;
His love is not yet spent, and ere it is
His child shall call her mother, and stretch out
Its tiny hands, stronger than chains of steel
To hold him from the queen.

UTA. O! dream it not.
Most unrelenting, cruel, fierce, and harsh
Is tender seeming Love; all laws and rules,
And sacred promises, and solemn oaths
Break in his grasp like withes. He makes his jest
Of all considerations, ties, and bonds,
Takes shame for honour, welcomes infamy,
Calls pain delight, and makes a mock of death,
For he alone is fearless, strong, and free.

HAGEN. A sweet companion truly, for my part
I'll make a shift to sleep alone o'nights,
Rather than cap his folly in the day.

UTA. And when the old love wakes in Sigurd's heart,
The godlike nature shall arise, and then
Beware of Odin's son, for he shall be
E'en as the gods; are they compassionate?
Do they pluck back the little child that leans
An inch too far beyond the giddy crag
To snatch a flower? or calm the tempest's rage
Because the widow's thatch is thin and old?
Righteous they are, beneficent, and just,
But pitiless, and dost thou think that they
Shall pause for any love of thine and thee?

HAGEN. I have not paused for love of theirs and them.
Say, dost thou know a means to turn aside
The threatened woe?
UTA. Undo what thou hast done.
Go to the king, if need be tell him all.
The queen is still unsullied; that I saw
By the proud scorn she flashed upon the king;
Let her return again into her land
E'en as she came. So shall Prince Sigurd still
Dwell in your halls, and never know the truth.
HAGEN. To-morrow I will see what can be done.
UTA. Nay, nay, to-night. The sultry air is still,
As hushed by apprehension of a crime,
And the night creatures flap their noiseless wings
Close to the casement, heavily, as if
They scented here a deed to joy their hearts.
HAGEN. Good Uta, age is timorous, thou knowest
I cannot summon Gunter, for the queen
Might hear our secret counsels and reveal
The whole to Sigurd. What can chance ere morn?
UTA. They cannot change their shapes without thine aid?
HAGEN. No, no; they will not masquerade to-night.
UTA. Would I had never left the quiet grove
Of Odin, never seen thy mother's face.
(Exeunt. Storm. Enter Sigurd.)
SIGURD. So all is still. The dark and stormy night
Is suited to the deed. Ha! What was that?
What? have I grown so timorous that the wind
Shaking the ancient branches of the oak
Can stop me in my purpose? It must be,
Gunter must rule her, and he is her lord,
I give him but his own. But yet to bind
Those queenly hands.—The horror of such deeds
Is little suited to the light of day,
And yet they must be done. Ha! Now he comes.
(Enter Gunter.)
Shall I go look for Hagen?
GUNTER. No. The night
Is mask enough. The wind has quenched the lamp
Within her chamber.

SIGURD. That is well.
GUNTER. The bed
Is on the further side.
SIGURD. Now hide yourself
Until the deed be done.
(Exeunt Sigurd to the Queen, Gunter along the galery. Enter Gudrun.)
GUDRUN. Where is he gone?
Why should he leave me, his new married wife,
To wander in the darkness? It is said,
My mother's ghost of late hath left the grave
To linger in her old accustomed halls,
And that she stands before my brother's door
And moans and wrings her hands. It well may be
That she has called him forth into the night.
What would she have with Sigurd? I have heard
Those that are glad are ever full of fears,
And I have been most happy.—What is that?
Methought I heard a voice within the storm,
That wailed and clamoured. It was not my lord's,
It was a woman's voice.
BRUNH. (within) I yield. I yield.
(thunder.)
GUDRUN. Ah! There again; 't was from my brother's room.
SIGURD. (within) Never again in act or thought to raise
Thy will against thy lord.
BRUNH. (within) No. Nevermore.
(thunder.)
GUDRUN. What horror lurks behind these folded doors?
(Enter Sigurd.)
'T is Sigurd, 't is my lord.
SIGURD. Ha! Who art thou?
GUDRUN. Knowst thou me not? I am Gudrun, thy wife;
Why wast thou with the queen?
SIGURD. What dost thou here?
Go back to bed.
GUDRUN. Nay but what dost thou here?
What didst thou there?
SIGURD. That which thou mayst not know.
GUDRUN. Sigurd, I am thy wife, thou art my love;
Whom should I love, whom should I trust but thee?

Because I loved thee more than all the world
I wedded thee, and trust me, I'll be true.
If then my brother Gunter wrought thee wrong,
And thou hast done that which I dare not name,
I will not leave thee. Tell me all the truth,
Trust me, though weak, I can be strong for thee.

SIGURD. Sweet love, thy brother is alive and well,
And we are friends. Now, will not that suffice?

GUDRUN. What didst thou there then with the queen alone
In all the stormy secrecy of night?

SIGURD. That, dearest love, which I may not repeat.

GUDRUN. The truth, my lord, for I will know the truth;
Is then my brother's wife thy paramour,
And dost thou steal away from out my arms
So soon to sate the grossness of thy lust?

SIGURD. Nay, love, thou knowst that these are foolish words.

GUDRUN. Then tell me all the truth, or I will rouse
The house to view the darkness of thy deed.
But open up before me all thy heart,
And there's no shame I will not share with thee.

SIGURD. Canst thou indeed be secret?

GUDRUN. As thy thought.

SIGURD. Know then that by a charm that Hagen wrought
I changed my form with Gunter, won the queen
As if I were your brother, conquered her
When she thought Gunter conquered, and at first
Tamely she did his bidding, but yestre'en
She bound him hand and foot, and bade him keep
His bridal night there on the ground alone,
And hardly with the dawning of the day
She set him free, telling him, if again
He ventured to approach or dream of love,
Then would she whip him like a craven hound
Amid his vaunted heroes. This the King
Entrusted to me, and for the oath's sake
I swore to gain thee, dearest, I to-night
Have bound her as last night she bound her lord,
And left her panting helpless on the bed.

GUDRUN. And still she thinks 't was Gunter?
SIGURD. In the night
She took me for him. See I stripped these rings
From off her finger.

(thunder.)

They perchance contain
The secret of her might, at least she strove
Wildly to save them. Now away to bed,
For I must wait the coming of the king.
GUDRUN. One kiss, dear love, you are the peerless ever.
SIGURD. And yet my own dear wife, the sweet Gudrun,
The tender hearted, innocent Gudrun
Can find no crime so black in all her dreams,
But she must think that Sigurd, her dear love,
Would surely do it, if she were not by.
GUDRUN. Nay, you may chide me.
SIGURD. Now away to bed.
GUDRUN. But do not linger longer than you must,
I fear the thunder lying there alone.

(Exit Gudrun.)

SIGURD. O wretched greatness! miserable Queen!
And mine is all the guilt of all thy woe.
How the wind sobs around the castle wall!
E'en so she sobbed while yielding. Still my heart,
I will not think of it.

(Enter Gunter.)

GUNTER. How Sigurd? Is it done?
SIGURD. 'T is done, my lord.
GUNTER. Bound, did you say?
SIGURD. Ay, bound upon the bed.
GUNTER. Now every joy of every happy god
Be granted thee. Thou art indeed a friend.
SIGURD. Although thou art my brother and my friend,
Great Odin be the witness of my truth,
This did I not for friendship nor for love,
But only for the oath's sake that I swore.

(Exeunt each to his chamber. Storm continues. Enter Attendants severally.)

FIRST ATTEND. This is a fearful night.

(thunder.)

SEC. ATTEND. Surely that time
It struck the castle.
THIRD ATTEND. Is the King asleep?
FOURTH ATTEND. Go, call the princes.
SEC. ATTEND. Never in my life
Did I behold such lightning.

(Enter first Servant.)

FIRST SERV. The old oak
Beside the castle gate is rent in twain.
FIRST ATTEND. That is an evil omen.

(Enter Hagen and Giselher.)

HAGEN. What has chanced?
SERVANT. The oak is struck.
GISELHER. What oak?
FIRST ATTEND. The oak of Thor,
Which the great founder of the castle set
Before its gates.

(Enter second Servant bearing two dead eagles.)

HAGEN. What fear has blanched thy cheek?
SEC. SERV. Behold, my lord. E'en as the lightning's flash
Blasted the oak, I stood before the gate,
Seeking a shelter from the storm. I eyed
The rolling clouds, and in the pallid light
I saw two eagles riding on the winds,
Then suddenly it seemed that I was wrapped
In a vast flame of fire, and at my feet,
Slain by the lightning, fell the royal birds.
GISELHER. 'T is passing strange.
SEC. SERV. E'en while I gazed, the oak
Sunk riven to its roots across the path.
SEC. ATTEND. Great gods avert the omen.
GISELHER. Call the King.
HAGEN. Great Gunter!
GISELHER. Noble Sigurd!

(Enter Gunter and Sigurd.)

HAGEN. Can you sleep
When the great gods are knocking at our doors
With fearful signs and wonders? Lo! the oak,
The mystic oak, the symbol of our House,

Is cleft by lightning; there two eagles lie,
As none has heard it told at any time,
Slain by the bolts of heaven.

SIGURD. What should we do?
We cannot stop the clouds, nor bid them cease
To lighten in our faces, cannot build
The shattered oak again, nor give these birds
New life to sport with danger. Can we stay
The mighty gods from striking in their wrath
If they indeed be angry? Wherefore then
Should we disturb our slumbers ere the morn,
To read pale fear each on the other's brow,
And augur darker terrors than the night
Bears in her bosom? See, the storm has passed,
And in the east the starry guide of morn
Is slowly rising. What shall be will be
In spite of us; let's bide it manfully.

**Scene II.** The same. Gudrun's chamber. Enter GUDRUN.

GUDRUN. How fresh the morning is! The storm has passed,
Leaving a brighter glory on the flowers
Than heretofore. So do our present joys
Look brighter for the passing clouds of pain
When love shines out upon them. Now my lord
Outspeeds the swiftest huntsmen in the chase
Braving the haughty queen. 'T is scarcely noon,
And he will not return till eventide,
So let me see the secret of his fate.
'T is sweet to watch above the thing we love
And guard its life from danger; I as yet
Have only rested happy in the love
That freely beamed upon me, or at best
Could only love him, sitting quietly
Beside his knees, and reading in his face
The secrets of true glory. As a child
That speaks the words it does not understand
Because its father speaks them, I have sought

To imitate his greatness; yet methinks
I could do much for Sigurd if I knew
The way to do it. Now indeed the way
Stands clearly mapped before me, yet it grieves
My heart to have a secret from my lord.

(She opens a casket.)

Only a ring; 't is strangely wrought, and yet
I surely must have seen its like before,
Graven with secret signs and sacred runes,
A charmed ring, perhaps, I'll try its power.

(She puts the ring on her finger.)

It glistens weirdly in the sun and gleams
With wreathed lights and shadows, but I feel
No token of a charm. Why such ado
About a beautiful but simple ring
Which I might surely wear in Sigurd's sight
And he be none the wiser?

(Enter Sigurd.)

SIGURD. What sweet dreams
Hold you in sunny trances?
GUDRUN. Ha! My lord!
SIGURD. Why do you start and tremble?
GUDRUN. How is this?
Why came you from the hunt?
SIGURD. The mighty queen,
Ere we had reached the forest's brownest shades,
Reined in her steed, and said she would not hunt
But seek great Odin's temple. I, who went
Merely to pay due honour to the queen,
Then left her train. Your brothers linger still
Within the forest. I returned alone,
Drawn homewards by the might of witching eyes
That did not smile to see me.
GUDRUN. Nay, my love,
Thy presence is my sunlight; if the sun
Broke suddenly from out the darksome night,
Would you first smile or wonder?
SIGURD. What have you on your finger?
GUDRUN. 'T is a ring
My mother gave me.

SIGURD. Wherefore hide it then?
Nay, I must see it.
GUDRUN. Wherefore should you wish
To see a paltry jewel, that I love
Only because my mother gave it me?
SIGURD. Why should you care to hide it?
GUDRUN. If I said
It was a charmed ring, an amulet,
What would you answer?
SIGURD. That I need no charm
To keep my wife from danger.
GUDRUN. Good my lord,
If that you love me, let me keep the ring;
I'll hide it well, it shall not vex your eyes;
Indeed, you must not see it.
SIGURD. Tell me why,
Nay, I must know the secret of the ring.
GUDRUN. Great Sigurd, if you love me, ask no more.
'T is love that steps between you and your wish,
Nay, if you love me, trust me,
SIGURD. Tell me all!
The ring, the ring, why would you hide the ring?
GUDRUN. My mother's maid, an ancient withered crone
Who nursed her when a babe, gave me the ring;
She bade me hide it well, but most of all
From Sigurd's eyes, or ill would come of it.
Now, for love's sake, dear love, demand it not.
SIGURD. Nay, I must see it.
GUDRUN. Taking it, you take
The unknown world of ill that it may bring.
O! yet be warned, and let it rest with me.
SIGURD. Nay, it beseems a man to know the truth
And not to dread the ill that it may bring.
I would not dwell in a bright world of dreams
Guarded by lying spells; although the truth
Be dark and bitter, I would know the truth,
See the real world, and feel its joys and woes,
And if it must be, die in facing them.
GUDRUN. Then take it.—Wherefore does your cheek grow pale?
What sudden horror glares from out your eyes?

SIGURD. Like one that panting wakes from out the dark
And hideous changes of a fretful dream,
And lies in silence, striving to recall
The forms that froze the currents of his blood,
And dashed his brow with the cold spray of fear,
But errs at random through the desert waste
Of thought, and finds them not, yet trembles still
Beneath the presence of a formless dread,
I vainly seek to grasp the clue that binds
My story to the story of the ring;
I only know 't is secret, dark, and dread,
Black with foul crime and nameless infamy.
GUDRUN. 'T is but a lying spell to vex thy thought,
For thou art free from infamy and shame.
SIGURD. Ah! yes; I have them here, the rings, the rings,
Stripped from Brunhilda's finger.
GUDRUN. One is bright
With a strange glitter, lovely to behold.
SIGURD. Yet fearful, like a sweet and hidden crime.
GUDRUN. The other is the counterpart of that
Which Uta gave me.
SIGURD. Still the sense is dark
That lurks behind them.
GUDRUN. Do not vex thy thought
With fruitless guesses. Queen Brunhilda deals
In hidden lore; she doubtless sent it me
To work thee harm.
SIGURD. It may be so; come here.

(They sit down on a couch, Sigurd places his sword drawn between them.)

Bear thou the rings, but bear them secretly
Upon thy breast that the queen see them not,
And when thou risest from thy bed at morn,
And when at eve thou liest down again,
Sign thou this rune upon thy brow, this rune
Upon thy breast, this rune upon thy lips,
Now, hast thou marked them?
GUDRUN. Wherefore dost thou lay
The dreadful sword, the symbol of the law
Of mighty Odin, since I am thy wife,

Thus threateningly between us, and O! whence
Hast thou this secret knowledge?

SIGURD. (after a long pause suddenly) O ye gods!
E'en so I sat beside her on her couch,
So the sword lay between us, so the light
Fell on her head, but played on golden locks,
Bright in the sunshine, and she taught the runes
That now I teach, and so the oaths were sworn
That all are broken. Go and bring the wretch
From whom thou hadst the ring, and linger not,
For I must see her; death is in delay.

(Exit Gudrun.)

If this indeed be so, if that my thought
Be not a brainsick fancy; if indeed
The queen I forced to wed the man she loathes,
This queen Brunhilda were my very bride,
Betrothed by holy oaths?—It cannot be—
The crime were all too hideous—If 't were so?—
Then in the lists of all that mocked the gods
And cursed the world with crime whose blackest dye
Lies like a blot upon the sunny earth,
With those whom poets feign, whose evil deeds
Drop cold with horror in the hearer's ear,
Is none so base as Sigurd. Thought itself
Sinks back appalled from that which I have done,
And I who walked with upright head erect,
Amid a race of heroes, have but been
A mark, at which with scornful jests the gods
Have shot their fateful arrows.

UTA. (within) Wherefore then?
What would he with me? Has he seen the ring?

GUDRUN. (within) He made me show it, he would speak with you
And such an all-devouring flame of wrath
Flashed from his eyes, I durst not ask him why.

UTA. (at the door) Now death shall hold his court where ye have dwelt,
And desolation seize Giuki's house,
The loathsome things that dwell in ruined halls
Shall crawl across your chambers, and your name
Shall pass away, or linger like a ghost,

Sad and ill omened, on the tongues of men;
I will not see him.

SIGURD. (dragging in Uta) Come thou croaking hag.

(Enter Gudrun.)

Go thou and leave us.

(Exit Gudrun.)

Whence hadst thou the ring?

UTA. Grimhilda, my great mistress, gave it me.

SIGURD. How came she by it?

UTA. Can I tell?

SIGURD. The truth!

UTA. Glare not upon me with those dreadful eyes,
Struck by their terrors I forget to lie,
And do not seek to know the truth, my lord,
For if I tell it, it will make thee mad.

SIGURD. Knowst thou the tortures that the gods prepare
For those who stain their lips with perjury.

UTA. My lord, I know them, never ending pains,
Unutterable woes.

SIGURD. Then dare them not,
But swear, and speak the truth.

UTA. I will not swear.

SIGURD. Then will I curse thee to a darker fate.
Behold—

UTA. Nay pause, I swear.

SIGURD. To speak the truth,
To tell to the last word the frightful tale,
To hide no crime in all the damning list,
To veil no single horror of them all.

UTA. O! pause, nor seek to know thy wretchedness;
Nay, then I swear.

SIGURD. How did she gain the ring?

UTA. She stole it from thy finger in thy sleep.

SIGURD. What was her purpose?

UTA. I conjure thee yet
By all the Gods, to let me hide the tale
In the dark silence of a guilty grave.

SIGURD. Rave not, but answer me.

UTA. She took the ring,
Because it marred the spell she wrought on thee.

SIGURD. What spell?
UTA. Thou shouldst forget, thou hast forgot.
O! why remember now? The past is past;
Thou canst not change or blot a single act
That thou hast done by rage or penitence;
Why waken woe and death while yet they sleep?
SIGURD. Why did Grimhilda charm me to forget?
UTA. She would that thou shouldst wed the fair Gudrun.
SIGURD. And I have wed her. Why forget for this?
UTA. Thou wast betrothed already.
SIGURD. And to whom?
UTA. To Queen Brunhilda. Now thou knowst it all;
The ring she gave thee, a betrothal ring,
And many oaths were sworn, but few were kept.
Now let me go and die in peace, my lord,
There is no more to tell.
SIGURD. Go thou thy ways,
Uncursed by me, nor fearing any curse;
Who then should harm thee? Lo! the gods sit still,
Hoarding their terrors till the day be come
When they shall pour them all upon my head.
Go thou thy ways. I will go seek the queen.

**Scene III.** The same. Entrance to the grove and temple of Odin. Enter BRUNHILDA and ODDRUN.

ODDRUN. Nay, I rejoice; but yesterday you broke
Into wild bursts of scornful merriment
That rung more sad than weeping on my ear,
But your great soul is calm again to-day.
BRUNH. It is the calm of utter wretchedness,
The shipwrecked sailor wrestles with the wave
And wildly struggles to the distant hope,
But when it passes, folds his weary hands
And calmly takes his death.
ODDRUN. What hope is lost
Since yesternight?
BRUNH. All that I had, Oddrun,
All that was mine, as woman, bride, and queen,

And all the memories of the mighty time
When Odin smiled upon me, all have passed
Like unsubstantial shadows from my life,
And I am left in utter nakedness
To face the bitter winter of the world.

ODDRUN. All hope of the high future passed away
When Gunter won thy hand at Isenstein.

BRUNH. Yet still I fed my heart with lying dreams,
I could not think the ghastly tale was true,
Was true of me, my sister; still I said
Some god will surely touch great Sigurd's eyes
And he shall see, some might shall break the charm;
But now no god can help me. Yesternight
The craven King slunk silent from the room
And came again wrapped in the awful power
He wore at Isenstein. He bent my neck
And bound my hands. Oddrun, he made me swear
Never to dare rebel against him more.
Thou knowst I loathe him as the happy loathe
The name of death, but as he stood by me
I did not loathe him, for it almost seemed
That Sigurd's breath was warm upon my cheek,
That Sigurd's arms were round me. So he went
And came again. The rest let silence veil
In darkest horror; I am Gunter's wife.

ODDRUN. Sad is thy fate; yet, sister, think and hope,
Thou art not fallen in a lonesome gulf,
Thou must but share the woe of all mankind.

BRUNH. But we are trained to bear it. From the day
When first they stretch their hands into the cold,
Kind nature teaches them with wholesome pain
To bear the sorrows of an after-life;
From love and helplessness they gently learn
The lesson of submission, but I stood
Armed in the presence of the mighty gods,
I fought, I ruled; now I must learn to crouch
In deep subjection to a hateful sway;
No mother's voice makes sweet the bitter task,
No father speaks 'obey' in such a tone
As makes it sound like 'love'. O! I could weep

In very pity of myself. In sweets
Poison is hid, but they have poisoned me
With gall instead of honey.—It is hard;
The sword and sceptre fall from out my hand,
And I must grasp the distaff, and the mind
That shared the wisest counsels of the gods
Must learn the sordid uses of the world,
For all the past has vanished like a dream.

ODDRUN. Now hast thou reached the lowest depth of all,
And every change that comes must bring thee good;
Therefore hope on.

BRUNH. Yet does the darkest woe
Remain unspoken.

ODDRUN. What can still remain,
If every hope be fled.

BRUNH. The fatal ring
Has passed from out my keeping; I alone
On all the earth can keep it, and the curse
That lowers above the Nibelungen hoard
Must break on Sigurd's head. That and the ring
Of my betrothal Gunter snatched from me,
Perchance to pay the powers that wrought the charm.

ODDRUN. O! let us enter on the sacred grove
And pray the high protection of the gods.

BRUNH. No god among them all can break the spell,
Or stay the hand of unrelenting fate.

ODDRUN. Why didst thou turn aside then from the hunt
To seek the house of Odin?

BRUNH. Not for help;
How should I trust them who betrayed my trust
With lying oaths? To me their love has been
Foul cruelty, and treachery their faith;
But, if it be my weakness or my strength
I cannot tell, falling beneath their curse
I love them still, and dying I will raise
Mine eyes in adoration to their thrones.
They cannot aid me, I can have no part
In all their joys; for in my rage I called
For aid in vengeance to the nether powers;

But I will serve them truly without meed,
Who without cause have doomed me to this woe.

(They enter the grove. Enter Sigurd.)

SIGURD. O! turn, most noble and most wretched Queen,
And listen to me.

BRUNH. Who is he that calls,
Naming in bitter words a bitter fate?

SIGURD. How shall I call myself, whose very name
Is loathsome to me, hateful to thine ear?
For me the mighty gods have lain in wait
With cunning curses, me have they betrayed
To guiltless guilt, unperjured perjury.

BRUNH. Then are we near akin in wretchedness.

(Exit Oddrun to the temple.)

What, Sigurd, art thou weary of thy friends?
Thou chosest Gunter, Gudrun didst thou choose;
Go pour thy tale of woe into her ear.

SIGURD. Blindly I chose the dreary path of crime,
And keeping perjured oaths, I broke my faith.

BRUNH. I told thee how to choose, I said a grave
Was yawning for thee, but thou wouldst not hear.

SIGURD. Who ever yet, save I, in choosing chose
Sorrow and crime for innocence and peace.

BRUNH. I told thee Fafnir in his brother's blood
Looked fairer than thy fame. What wilt thou more?
Thou canst not cheat me once again with oaths
To sell me to my foe, my might is gone,
Why comest thou then to vex me with thy voice?

SIGURD. I know not why I came, I cannot say,
Thus gazing on the woe that swells thy breast,
The woe that mars thy life; forgive my crime.

BRUNH. I only asked to live and die alone,
Holding my faith unsullied in my soul,
Keeping thy form undimmed within my breast,
Thou wouldst not strike one blow in my defence.

SIGURD. Yet do not curse me. Lo! the outraged gods
Shall heap their curses on me, all mankind
Shall curse my name; ay, and my guilty soul,
Broken from all the blindness of its pride
To dust, applauds the justice of each curse;

But O! forbear to add thy voice to these,
These I can bear; I cannot bear thy curse.
BRUNH. I do not curse thee Sigurd; nay, my friend,
We two will stand together. All the world
Is leagued against us, and the fickle gods
Have joined them to the number of our foes;
We two will fall together. Couldst thou dream
That I would curse thee whom alone I love,
But I have cursed the foes that blinded thee,
And those I cursed who with unhallowed charms
Gave Gunter might to win me for his bride;
But thee I cursed not, thee I will not curse.
Come let us sit together as of old
We sat at Isenstein beside the sea;
Dost thou remember all the joyous days
When we two dwelt together?
SIGURD. O'er my heart
They steal with a reproachful tenderness;
Thou taught'st me runes, thou taught'st me how to rule
And then we held discourse of mighty deeds
That I should do, and that I have not done.
BRUNH. Those were the plans of Odin, they are vain.
SIGURD. Ay, vain through me who broke my plighted faith.
BRUNH. Through those that blinded thee to break thy faith.
Yes; all is strangely riddled; 't was decreed
Oddrun should wed with Gunter, and Gudrun
Become the wife of Atli, these should be.
The very props and bulwarks of our throne;
That might have been, now it will never be.
SIGURD. O! how my soul has dwindled since the days
Of our betrothal, looking back I see
The golden summits of my early youth
Towering above the desert of my prime
In thought, and word, and action.
BRUNH. Good my friend,
Dost thou still love me? Do not wrench my words
To thoughts unworthy of the mighty past,
We both are soiled too deeply with our sin

To dare to taste the sacrificial wine
Of holy passion. Thou hast wed Gudrun,
And am I not king Gunter's wretched wife?
We scarce dare gaze into each other's eyes,
We may not clasp each other's hands or kiss
As once we did, the rites of love are past;
But dost thou love me still? Do all my words
Go flashing joyous pulses to thy heart?
Dost thou hate Gunter as I hate Gudrun,
The baby-eyed and narrow-browed Gudrun?
And dost thou feel that sitting thus alone
Is meed for years of anguish? that to live
With me, a base born peasant in his hut,
Were better than to rule the world alone?
Dost thou still love me?

SIGURD. Nay, I love thee not.
I know this horror is the worst of all,
And yet I dare not hide it from thine eyes
With lying words. I know that thou art great,
I feel thou art the noblest in the world,
But yet thy greatness is so far away
I cannot grasp it. Yawning like a gulf
Between us lies the madness of my life;
My foolish hopes, and my delirious deeds,
The woe I worked, the work I left undone
Have taken such a hold upon my soul
That it has lost its ancient nobleness.
Thou movest high above me, like the stars
In their eternal courses. Nay, I know
That in thy love alone were perfect peace,
That it alone could give me back the pure
And mighty purpose of my early youth,
And yet I cannot love thee. It is hard
To own that life has been a fevered dream,
That all our hopes were vain, that all our deeds
Were worthless, that the anguish we have borne
Can bear no fruit, that there is left no way
To patch the broken purpose we conceived,
No hope to mend our faults, and yet to gain
Some gold of honour from the dross of life,

That both our future and our past are lost;—
'T is very bitter, but the truth is best.

BRUNH. I thought when here I came in wretchedness,
That I had drained life's poison to the dregs,
Yet still the bitterest drop of all was left,
Now it has come, for Sigurd loves me not,
The spell has passed, and yet he loves me not,
I was not wretched, Sigurd, till you came,
I was not outcast, till you cast me off,
But now the awful loneliness of life
Enwraps me, all is past—you love me not.

SIGURD. Yet, do not curse me.

BRUNH. Nay, I blame thee not.
And if thou lovedst it were of no avail.
But, Sigurd, since I love thee, go thy ways,
Return into thy kingdom, leave me here;
I cannot watch thee sitting by Gudrun
In loving talk, I cannot see her eyes
Kindle beneath thy glances, but the thoughts
Of other days awake within my heart:
Strange passions seize my spirit, and a wish
Fearful yet joyous, like the awful thirst
That filled me when great Odin from his throne
Cried out 'Arise and slay!' and suddenly
I swept above the drifting tides of war,
Bending the necks of heroes. Therefore leave
The court as soon as may be. Lo! I go
To Odin's house to pray the mighty gods
For counsel both for thee and me. Farewell.

(Exit Sigurd.)

Oddrun!

(Enter Oddrun.)

Keep thou strict watch before the gate,
That none may enter. It may be that yet
The mighty Father of the World shall deign
To teach me of his wisdom, though I fear
There is no way but death out of these coils.

(Exit Brunhilda to the temple.)

ODDRUN. In spite of all the riddles of our lives,
I cannot choose but think the mighty gods

Are far more just and wise than we conceive,
Ay, and more loving. Oftentimes they hide
In the rough husk of their most bitter curse
Their sweetest fruit of blessing, but vain man,
Poor, wayward man in his shortsighted pride,
Pervents their choicest blessing to a curse.

(Enter Gudrun and Maidens.)

GUDRUN. Here stand and watch. The evil hearted queen,
Maddened by haughty envy of my joy,
Seeks with unhallowed spells to harm my lord,
But I will call on Odin, I will charm
His mighty ear with holy chaunts, and pray
His aid with wonted rites of sacrifice
So that he may confound her wicked thoughts,
And save us from destruction. You meanwhile
Keep solemn watch before the temple gate.

ODDRUN. You may not enter.

GUDRUN. May not! Who art thou
That darest to bar the passage of a queen
With an imperious may not?

ODDRUN. I am one
Who does the bidding of a greater queen,
Brunhilda in the silence of the grove
Implores the aid of Odin.

GUDRUN. Who is she
That she should close unto their daughter's prayers
The temple of my fathers, and disturb
The solemn silence of their sacred grove
With bitter imprecations on my lord,
Whom she detests because his noble mind
Holds no acquaintance with her wickedness?

ODDRUN. Be calm Gudrun; it is not meet that these
Should hear your wrathful words, and rest assured
If that Brunhilda breathed Prince Sigurd's name,
It would not be to curse it. It may be
She prays the mighty gods to guard your lord.

GUDRUN. Ay, it may be,—her love of him is known
And in what high respect myself am held,
The very servants jesting in the hall
Make merry with it.

(Enter Brunhilda.)

BRUNH. Who are these that dare
To break the sacred calm of Odin's grove
With their unseemly wrangling?

GUDRUN. Who art thou
That darest to step between me and the gods?

BRUNH. I am thy mistress, overweening girl.

GUDRUN. O! listen to the madness of her pride,
This half barbarian, nurtured in the woods,
This queen whose want of royal courtesy
Has been the jest of every serving man,
This thing, half man half woman, that the king
In some strange freak of passion made his wife,
Would lord it over me with scornful words;
In sooth, she is the mistress, I the maid.

BRUNH. Wert thou my maid, a fitting chastisement
Should teach thee better manners; on my life
I could not brook a maid so rude as thou,
But as it is, being my vassal's wife,
He shall reprove thee.

GUDRUN. Did you mark her words?
Prince Sigurd is her vassal—this is well.

BRUNH. He is King Gunter's vassal, I his wife.

GUDRUN. O! foolish boasting; was it ever heard
That vassal wed the sister of his lord?

BRUNH. Truly at first I thought it somewhat strange,
But since I see how peevish is your mood,
How much unfit you are to be a queen,
I think your brother right, who held you cheap,
And wisely wed you to his serving man.

GUDRUN. What liar told thee Sigurd served the king?

BRUNH. Thy insult falls upon thy husband's head,
He owned it without shame at Isenstein.

GUDRUN. O foolish Queen! thy pride hath blinded thee.
Go, ask the children playing in the streets
Who is the mightiest man in all the world,
And they will answer Sigurd; ask them who
With his strong hand hath propped the tottering throne
Of Gunter, and their answer is his name.
Did not he wreak such vengeance on the heads

Of those that slew his father that the world
Stood hushed to hear the echoes of his wrath?
Did not he harry Fafnir's rocky nest,
And bear away the Nibelungen hoard?
And what did Gunter do the live-long day,
But sit and marvel at the glorious tale?

BRUNH. (aside) O truth! sweet truth! then was my Sigurd mine,
O bitter truth! since he is mine no more,
And all the promise of those days has passed.
(aloud) Yet is the master greater than the man,
And foolish girl, 't was more that Gunter's arm
O'ermastered mine than all that Sigurd did,
For the great Father of the World decreed
That none but the most mighty man on Earth
Should vanquish me, and this hath Gunter done,
So cease thy peevish scolding, and begone.

GUDRUN. Then know 't was Sigurd's arm o'ermastered thine,
'T was Sigurd bound thy proud rebellious hands
But yesternight, and cast thee on the bed,
And holding thee unworthy of his care,
He left thee there, to sob and sigh alone,
Vexing the darkness with thy sad complaint.
Behold the rings he stripped from off thy hand,
Canst thou deny them? therefore, haughty Queen,
Make way for me, for I am more than thou.

(Gudrun passes Brunhilda. Bugle within. Gudrun pauses.)

BRUNH. O Odin! hear my prayer, thy daughter's prayer,
It is thy child that cries to thee, thy child
Whom they have mocked, and blinded, and betrayed,
I did rebel against thee, but my fault
Was better than their virtues, and behold
I am thy child, begotten of thy seed,
Thy daughter, who did stand before thy face
And share thy counsels. Wilt thou hold thy peace
When I am baited by this mongrel pack,
And he, thy son, my lord, before whose feet
I poured my love like water, hounds them on?
Not for my crime they hate me, but because

Upon the weakness of this human form
A shadow of thy glory still remains,
And on the darkness of my stormy thought
A reflex of thy wisdom. All my might
Is broken, I am bound and sold to shame,
Yet am I not as they. O! then avenge
Thyself in me, and let this paltry tale
Of futile aspirations find an end
Not all unworthy of that higher life
Which I, O mighty Father! drew from thee.

(A bugle within. Enter Gunter, Sigurd, Hagen, Giselher, Lords, and Attendants, as from hunting.)

ODDRUN. (to Gunter) Behold the queen.
HAGEN. Why, what a scene is this!
SIGURD. (to Gudrun) You showed the rings.
GUDRUN. (after a long pause to Sigurd) My lord her scornful words
Compelled me—O my Sigurd! O my love!
Glare not upon me with those cruel eyes.
SIGURD. (to Gunter) My lord it is not meet we tarry here,
Our way lies towards the palace. Come, Gudrun.
There will I wait your sentence with my wife,
My Queen, your sentence.

(Exeunt Sigurd and Gudrun.)

ODDRUN. Noble Gunter bid
Your train retire, 't is meet that those alone
Who share your deepest secrets should remain.
GUNTER. You, Giselher and Hagen, stay with me,
The rest may go.

(Exeunt Lords, Attendants, Maidens, etc.)

Now, wherefore this ado?
BRUNH. O noble Gunter if it was your will
That I should be the jest of all your court,
Exposed to every insult, shame, and wrong,
Controlled, reviled, and scorned by every tongue,
Why did you mock me with the name of queen?
Why dress me in the garb of sovereignty?
Why call me wife? why bid the menial throng
Bend low before me? why deceive my ear
With the false flattery of pretended love?

Since now the insults that are heaped on me
Must soil your royal garments, and my shame
Becomes your own, because I am your wife.
GUNTER. Insults! who then has dared to insult the queen?
BRUNH. Gudrun, your sister, broke upon my prayers,
Taunting me with a thousand bitter words,
And then she lied.—It surely was a lie.
GUNTER. What did she say?
BRUNH. She spoke it openly,
While all her maidens gaped to hear the tale.
I dare not breathe it here amid our friends,
Our nearest friends. Come thou my lord apart.
(Gunter and Brunhilda walk apart.)
Here to the silent keeping of thine ear
I trust her taunt as if it were my sin.
She said 't was Sigurd's arm o'ermastered mine,
'T was Sigurd cast me sobbing on the bed
But yesternight. Surely my lord she lied.
GUNTER. Bitter shall be my answer to her taunt,
Thyself, my queen, shalt doom her punishment.
BRUNH. Her taunt, my lord, you did not say her lie.
GUNTER. Her lie—but no, 't is vain; I will not strive
To blind thee longer. Love shall plead for me.
False were the arts by which I won thy hand,
But true shall be the faith I pledged to thee.
BRUNH. O! wretch, unworthy of the name of man!
O strength, ill matched with cunning to betray!
O wretched woman, blinded and undone!
I am not fit to stand before thy face,
And yet not mine the sin, though mine the shame.
GUNTER. What means the pallid anguish of thy looks?
BRUNH. Was not the hand of night upon my eyes
When I became Prince Sigurd's concubine?
GUNTER. It cannot be, he swore the holiest oaths.
BRUNH. He swore, my lord, who doubts it? As a child
Plays with a toy, so Sigurd plays with oaths,
And now low laughing with the false Gudrun
He makes his sin his pastime, you and me
The butt of all his jests. What does he care

That all his crimes are open to the day,
Since none can match the valour of his arm?
GUNTER. And this is he in whom I put my trust,
The model of my actions, whom I placed
Before me as a conscience clad in flesh
To try my very thoughts! If crime can wear
So proud a mask, what garb shall virtue choose
To shield her from suspicion? Sigurd false,
Who then is true? Where is a test to try
The hearts of men, that we may know true gold
From its base counterfeit?
BRUNH. Blood, blood, my lord,
Blood is the only test to try the truth.
GUNTER. Yet Sigurd never grudged his blood for me.
BRUNH. If I had wed the meanest of thy train,
One hand at least had been my honour's guard;
The merest caitiff in the world will strike
To right the honour of the wife he loves,
Only the king will bear it patiently,
And salve his wounded name with honied words,
And gild his tarnished honour with wise saws,
Because he sickens at the thought of blood,
And only I, most miserable queen,
Basely betrayed and mocked before thy face,
Clad with dishonour as a robe, and crowned
With shame, must walk along thy palace halls,
Seeing the sneers I must not seem to see,
Because my husband dare not take my part,
And none will draw his sword to right the queen.
GUNTER. Nay, I will right thee, love, thy foe shall die.
BRUNH. To-night, my lord?
GUNTER. If it may be, to-night,
But I must speak with Hagen.
(Gunter returns to Hagen and Giselher; Brunhilda to Oddrun.)
ODDRUN. Lo! the king
Speaks to his brothers with a wrathful brow;
What hast thou done?
BRUNH. Have not I been his fool?
Now is he mine, and listen in thine ear,
Our griefs are near their ending. Spite of Fate

I shall be wed to Sigurd; yea to-night
We two shall rest upon our bridal bed,
Lulled to sweet sleep, while this convulsive heart
Forgets the noisy riot of its woe,
Pillowed upon the safety of his breast.

(Exeunt Brunhilda and Oddrun.)

GISELHER. Are all his deeds forgotten? Is the great
And noble service he has done our House
Quite banished from thy thought? Has senseless rage
Such might upon thy memory as to blot
The record of the past? O! pause awhile;
Remember all the great and happy days
That we have lived together, all the toil
Of war and peace that he hath shared, the blows
That he hath warded from thee. Canst thou find
One single mighty act in all thy life
In which he had no part? one single day,
In all the record of our happy days,
When Sigurd was not with thee? Canst thou name
But once when his was not the greatest toil
And ours the great advantage? Must I bid
Thy fickle heart remember how we sat
Beside the watch fire, when the winter wind
Howled down the mountain side in fitful gusts
Across the mangled bodies of the slain,
And thou didst lay thy kingdom in his hand,
But he refused the mighty name of King,
Bidding us call him brother? Thrice that day
He hewed a pathway through thy circled foes,
Snatching thee back from out the jaws of death,
To life and honour.

GUNTER. Wherefore now recall
The gladsome memories of a joyous time,
Since all their sweets have turned to bitterness?
And he must die, for he has done a deed
To change the very heart of love to hate,
Undone the holy bonds so firmly knit,
Betrayed the friend that trusted him, and made
*Honour* itself the mask of treachery.

HAGEN. 'T were well to gain the Nibelungen hoard,
'T were ill to miss the prowess of his arm.
GISELHER. And worst of all to break our plighted faith,
And with a sword to cut the holy tie.
GUNTER. Oaths did he swear, but none of them he kept,
Vows did he make, and he has broken all,
O brothers! hide the horror in your hearts,
Let it not mar your features, lest the world
Should guess the story of my secret shame,
He loves the queen and forced her to his will.
GISELHER. It cannot be.
GUNTER. Nay, brother, it is so.
Did he not tell our secrets to his wife,
Boasting that he had won Brunhilda's hand
By his own might, and adding, what I hid
Even from you my brothers, that last night
I begged his aid once more to quell my wife
Who rose against me? With this tale Gudrun
Openly mocked Brunhilda, while her maids
Simpered to hear the story, murmuring low
Unseemly jests about the queen and me;
And ere we reach the castle every page
Will have discussed the scandal, seasoned it
With such remarks as wit and lust afford;
This might have been forgiven, but the wrong
He did me none that dares to bear a sword
Can patiently endure.
HAGEN. Then let him die,
And by his fall our lesser light shall glow
To brighter splendour.
GISELHER. As the little stars
Dare to look glorious when the sun is set.

# Act III.

**Scene I.** Worms. A gallery in the palace of Gunter leading to the apartments of Sigurd and the King. Night. Enter SIGURD.

SIGURD. What then remains?—To eat, and drink, and sleep,
And play my part in all this weary game
Of kings and heroes. Who would care to live
If this were all,—if that these little gains
Made up the sum and purpose of our life,
Its substance and its object? Who would tread
The weary round of each recurring day,
But for the higher purpose, the great dream
That casts upon the meanness of our life
An alien splendour, breaking like the sun
Upon the mists and vapours of the Earth
With sudden glory?—Ah! the dream is past,
Past is the joy and brightness of the world,
Past is the aim and purpose of my life,
Past all that made me Sigurd.

VOICES. (within) Vain, vain, all was vain,
Graven sign and spoken spell,
Grani bore across the plain
Glittering gold they guarded well.

SIGURD. They sing of me; they sing of how I slew
Fafnir, the dragon, in great Odin's sight,
Bearing away the Nibelungen hoard
In triumph to Brunhilda. But the end
And moral of the story, that indeed
They will not sing—not yet—how I betrayed
Great Odin's daughter, my betrothed bride,
Unto a life—I will not think of it.

(Enter Gudrun.)

GUDRUN. Forgive me love.

SIGURD. Forgive thee? What? The brightness of thine eyes,
Thy gentle face, thy voice so soft and low?
Forgive thee my own love? 'T was not thy fault,
Why then should I forgive?

GUDRUN. O! smooth thy brow;
Because I love thee Sigurd.

SIGURD. So did she,
And I have sold her unto such a fate,
'T were better I had slain her.

GUDRUN. Good my lord,
My fault was great; yet it arose from love,
From pride in thee.

SIGURD. She had no fault at all,
And yet I cast her like a noisome thing
Unto the hounds.

GUDRUN. I know not what thou sayst.

SIGURD. How shouldst thou? Did the Father of the Gods
Teach thee his wisdom? did he bid thee stand
Beside his son and share his purposes?
Or was it I that called thee from thy play
To be my wife?

GUDRUN. 'T was thou my lord that calledst,
And I that followed. It is better so,
At least for me, for so my trust is placed
In thee alone, and if thou love me not,
Odin shall hardly help me.

SIGURD. Her, indeed,
He did not help, e'en in her utmost need.

GUDRUN. Be thou more gentle; pity and forgive.

SIGURD. What hast thou done?

GUDRUN. Thou knowst it, good my lord,
I have betrayed thy trust.

SIGURD. Why, what of that?
I have betrayed her trust, and Odin's trust,
Who should be faithful to me?

GUDRUN. I, my lord,
Behold I am thy wife, and all my heart

Is true to thee. It was my tongue that erred,
Not, not my heart. 'T was pride and anger spoke,
'T was love to thee that made me false to thee.

SIGURD. 'T was love to thee that made me false; 't was love
And blindness led to crime.

GUDRUN. What dost thou mean?

SIGURD. I told thee once a secret, dost thou dare
To ask a new one?

GUDRUN. I will ask no more.
Have patience with me, Sigurd; I am but
A poor and foolish girl; forgive the past,
And teach me all my faults that I may strive
To mend them, and to please thee.

SIGURD. Nay, Gudrun,
Thou hast one fault, one single little fault,
But one, I fear, that thou wilt hardly mend.

GUDRUN. What is it? I will do thy will in all.

SIGURD. Thou art Gudrun, thou art the chosen wife
Of Sigurd, chosen of his wayward will
To be his love, to be his curse. Against
The primal purpose of the mighty gods,
He chose thee. O Gudrun! this is a fault
Black, black enough to damn thy name and his
Forever.

GUDRUN. I will go.

SIGURD. Nay, do not weep.
Dark thoughts have might upon me. Go thy ways
And hear the minstrels singing in the hall.
Go, I forgive thee, but indeed my mood
Is not atuned to loving dalliance.
Why dost thou stay?

GUDRUN. Why, love, am I forgiven,
And must I part from thee as strangers use
Without one kiss?

SIGURD. There, there. Art thou content?

GUDRUN. I must, but yet thy lips are very cold.
Nay, I'll not vex thee with my foolishness,
Farevell, my Sigurd.

(Exit Gudrun.)

SIGURD. Since the deed is done,
What boots a vain repentance? what avails
This careful calculation, if indeed
My guilt be guilt, when on this hand and that
Crime seemed to threaten? Since my life has grown
A paltry worthless tale, my deeds a match
For some poor madman's antics wild and vain,
Since Odin's high behest is unfulfilled,
His plans frustrated, and my name a scoff,
If it were guilt or blindness wrought my fall,
Why should I ask? What can it profit me?
Nay, had my virtues worked my overthrow,
It were the same. The gods are not as men
To ponder doubtful points of right and wrong,
They weigh the whole man in their balances,
And so pronounce their judgment. I was light
As dust. O! blessed are the poor and mean,
Not weighed against the greatness of my fate,
And not like me found wanting. Hark! they come.
I dare not look upon her face to-night.

(Exit Sigurd. Enter Gunter, Brunhilda, Hagen, Oddrun, Giselher, Lords, and Attendants.)

FIRST LORD. A plague upon this wedding! Spite of all
The pomp, there's been no mirth.

SEC. LORD. In truth, we seen
More like a burial than a bridal train.

THIRD LORD. O! stay your tongue, ill omened are your words.

FOURTH LORD. Have you heard nothing of some strife to-day
Between the queens?

THIRD LORD. Ay, ay, they say Gudrun—

FIRST LORD. Let's talk of it to-morrow, good my lord.

(Exeunt severally Gunter and Brunhilda, Gudrun, Oddrun, Lords, and Attendants.)

GISELHER. I will not trust the evil hearted queen.

HAGEN. If this be so or no, she loves the prince
More than the king, and she will find a way
To work out our destruction if he lives.

GISELHER. 'T were better that a great and sudden woe
O'erwhelmed us, than with open eyes to plunge
Into this depth of crime.
HAGEN. With open eyes,
Why don't you shut them? I accept the tale
She tells me, act as if the whole were true,
Seeing her ends are suited to my ends,
And if she lies—why, let her bear the guilt,
How can I fathom such a depth of guile?
GISELHER. But I will have no hand in Sigurd's death.
HAGEN. Sleep then, but I will act.

(Exit Giselher.)

I, too, could wish
I had a brother who would take my sins
Upon his shoulders, do the needful wrong,
And let me reap the harvest of the wrong
With spotless hands. Who does not loathe the sin,
The doubtful word, the questionable deed?
Who does not love the fragrant fruit that springs
From all this ordure? I must dung the field,
Break the hard clods, be dirty and despised,
For Gunter is too restless, Giselher
Too dainty for the business. Why should I
Do what they scorn, who have no wife or child
To share the harvest? Who would do it else?
And are they not my own, bone of my bone,
Flesh of my flesh? My brothers, it is well
That you are clean. You are the gilded towers,
I the foundation stone on which you rest,
Unseen, unseemly, but the house's prop.

(Exit Hagen. Enter Gunter and Brunhilda.)

GUNTER. Now all is dark and still; the time is ripe,
Yet will I steal along from door to door,
Lest some be waking to prevent the course
Of our most sudden justice.
BRUNH. It is well.

(Exit Gunter.)

To take them now, now in the very throb
And thrill of passion, with a hasty blow

To pierce the breast pressed close against her breast,
And so to end it, bid death burst on love
With wild confusion, like a sudden storm
Upon the golden summer.—It is just,
And I will do it, and stand forth before
The trembling court, and cry aloud: 'Behold
'A woman's hand doth right a woman's wrong,
'And Sigurd's blood is red upon my sword'.
And so conclude the story. Ay, and then
This wretched race that wrought our overthrow
Shall triumph in our fall. That must not be.
Be they the servants of my wrath, that so
Death may catch hold upon them and despair
Make them her scoff. Yes, thus it must be done.
My justice in their action grows to crime,
And I have wrought them so that their own hands
Shall tear apart the heavy gates of hell,
And let a swift curse out to make her prey
Of the last remnant of Giuki's house.—
But hark! who comes?

(Enter Gunter.)

GUNTER. Have you no light? The wind,
Or else some tricksome elf from out the dark
And lone recesses of the castle stair
Blew out my candle.

BRUNH. We shall need no light,
Short is the way, and easy to be found,
And darkness suits the deed.

GUNTER. Ay, but this deed
Is most unhallowed, and all evil things
Have might in darkness, light doth ban their power;
E'en as I passed my mother's door, methought
A demon grinned upon me, a cold hand
Swept o'er my brow, and flitting through the gloom,
Passed a pale form of unsubstantial air.

BRUNH. These spirits have but might to chill the blood
Of those that waver, on the stedfast soul
They have no power. But see, your brother comes
Bearing the light you long for.

(Enter Hagen.)

GUNTER. Now we wait
Only for Giselher.
HAGEN. He will not come.
BRUNH. What! does he tremble at the very name
Of Sigurd? fear him sleeping and unarmed?
HAGEN. He fears to put his trust in cunning words,
He trembles at the name of treachery.
BRUNH. And Hagen?
HAGEN. Acts, and reasons afterwards;
Nor fears to see his deed and hear its name.
GUNTER. Come, come; we trifle time in needless words.
BRUNH. Then go, my lord, and do the deed at once;
Come, shall I light your candle?
HAGEN. I will go,
But keep the light, he shall not see my face,
Lest he should rise and curse me ere he dies.

(Exit Hagen.)

GUNTER. Hark! heard you not a sound?
BRUNH. It was your heart
Beating in terror.
GUNTER. If he should awake,
And springing over Hagen's mangled corpse,
Break on us here, and slay us in his rage!
BRUNH. Your brother's hand is sure.
GUNTER. Ha! what was that?
It wailed like one that mourned a hidden crime.
BRUNH. It was the owlet hooting in the wood.
GUNTER. If it should waken Sigurd.
BRUNH. Nay, his heart
Is all too bold to quicken at the sound,
And Gudrun's lips have kissed his eyes asleep,
And Gudrun's love hath lulled his heart to rest.
GUNTER. Ha! now he comes.

(Enter Hagen.)

Why is thy cheek so pale?
BRUNH. What hast thou done?
HAGEN. I struck him, but he sprang,
E'en as a wounded lion from his lair,
And follows on my steps.

(Enter Sigurd wounded, with his sword drawn.)

SIGURD. Ha! here it ends.

(Sigurd falls on the steps.)

Death hath his iron fingers at my heart.
O! treason! treason! Basely am I slain.

BRUNH. (aside) O! woman-heart that wast so strong, be still
But for one hour. Why dost thou pant and throb?
Thine enemy lies dying at thy feet;
(aloud, advancing) 'T was I that slew thee, Sigurd.

SIGURD. It is well.

BRUNH. Nay, curse me; it was I that snatched thy soul
From the glad feast of love and sent it forth
To the dim, hungry regions of the dead;
False hearted traitor, it was I that gave
For thy warm bridal bed a chilly grave,
Then curse me.

SIGURD. Wait,—I saw thee in my dream,
It was a happy dream of Isenstein
And our betrothal.—Yes, I swore thee oaths.

BRUNH. (aside) O heart! be still, be still.

SIGURD. Thou lovedst me then.—

BRUNH. (aside) What is it, love or hate, or both in one
That breaks me thus?

SIGURD. Brunhilda, bend thee down,
Because thou lovedst me once, because I die,
Bend down; a horror harbours in my heart,
And dying I would breathe it in thine ear.

BRUNH. (aside, kneeling) Great Odin, bid him smite me with his sword.

SIGURD. Brunhilda, I betrayed thee, made thy foes
My friends; my bride, I sold thee to thy shame,
I took Gudrun to wife.

BRUNH. Therefore it was
I slew thee.

SIGURD. Nay, but listen, listen yet,
My Queen, my love, O my betrothed bride!
Death breaks the spell;—I love thee, dying thus,
Thee only, and thee ever.

BRUNH. O! sweet words,
Words sweet and bitter, mingled love and death,
Life of my life, my husband, mine at last,
There was no other way, no way but death
Where we could meet.
SIGURD. What! dost thou love me still?
BRUNH. I thought I hated thee, and so my love
Showed but as hate, and yet indeed 't was love
That slew thee Sigurd.
SIGURD. Welcome was the blow,
May Odin grant thee every happiness.
BRUNH. What! dost thou think that I will still live on,
And bend me to the uses of a world
Where Sigurd is not?—let thee tread alone
The gloomsome path? My latest sun has set,
And ere to-morrow's rises, I shall rest
Beside thee, Sigurd; 't is our bridal night,
And I will sleep beside thee in thy grave.
SIGURD. O love! my love!
(Gunter and Hagen advance.)
But who are these that come,
Like fearful ghosts stealing from out their tombs
To view their desolation.
BRUNH. These are they
Who joined with me to plot their brother's death.
SIGURD. Why have ye slain me?
(Enter Gudrun.)
GUDRUN. O! ye mighty Gods!
What have we here? My lord, my love is slain.
SIGURD. Hush! Let me rest my head upon thy knees;
So, that will do. Alas! thou art too young,
Thou art too tender hearted for this sight.
GUDRUN. Is it so bad my Sigurd? Let me see;
'T is but a little wound, it does not bleed,
At least not much; I'll bind it up, and then
All will be well again, and you will smile.
SIGURD. Though small, 't is large enough to let death in,
He's here, he catches at my breath. Poor child,
Thy care is vain, who would not pity thee
So young and yet a widow?

BRUNH. (aside) It is well;
She weeps, and I shall follow him alone.
GUDRUN. O Sigurd! speak and curse them ere thou diest,
They say the gods who sit so safe and still
In their high homes, regardless of our woe,
Will listen to the words of dying men,
O! then, my love, if thou hast strength to speak,
Curse these who stand and smile to see thee die.
SIGURD. They are thy brothers, child, I curse them not,
There's been too much of cursing. Why you sought
My death, I know not, have no time to ask,
Yet shall you answer it another day.—
Draw near, Brunhilda, let me see thy face,
Too long forgot—Ah me!—too late—too late—
It was my sin that—So the story ends.—
There is no more to do, no more to bear.
Thy hand—thy hand. (dies).
GUDRUN. He dies!
BRUNH. So sinks the light
Of this great world, blinded by earthborn mists,
Yet not inglorious. Thus I close the eyes
None other dared to gaze on, bidding thee,
The matchless hero, rest in quietness.
GUNTER. What have we done?
HAGEN. A deed that few will praise,
Yet it is done, and I will answer it.
(Enter Oddrun, Giselher, Lords, Attendants, and Women severally.)
ODDRUN. What awful voice piercing the silent night
Proclaimed 'he dies'?
FIRST LORD. What woful sight is this?
SEC. LORD. Who lies upon the steps?
THIRD LORD. A murdered king.
SEC. LORD. Who is it?
FIRST LORD. Who has done it?
FOURTH LORD. Search them out.
HAGEN. There lies the murdered Sigurd, there Gudrun
Sits mournful, and the king, the queen, and I
Are standing here; now, make the most of it.
FIRST LORD. Sigurd is dead.
SEC. LORD. Who?

THIRD LORD. Sigurd.
FOURTH LORD. Sigurd dead?
FIRST WOMAN. O woe unutterable!
SEC. WOMAN. Wretched night!
ODDRUN. Bring in a bier on which to lay the king.
THIRD WOMAN. Who slew him?
FIRST LORD. Nay I know not.
FOURTH WOMAN. Is he dead?

(A bier is brought. Oddrun goes to the feet, Giselher to the head of Sigurd.)

ODDRUN. If you are guilty of this prince's death,
At least forbear, my lord, to vex his corpse.
GISELHER. Nay, I am guiltless.
ODDRUN. Lift him gently then,
And bear him to the chamber of Gudrun.

(Giselher, Oddrun, and Lords lift Sigurd on to the bier. Others prepare to bear him away.)

BRUNH. Nay, here the tale must finish, set him down.
GUDRUN. Curse her, ye mighty gods, curse her, and all
Who joined with her to plot the cruel death
Of my dear lord.
GUNTER. Nay, sister, curse us not,
Great was Prince Sigurd, and beside his bier
I fain would only tell his nobleness,
But he was false to thee, as false to me,
He loved the queen.
BRUNH. Now I indeed could laugh
From out the very fulness of my heart;
Had Sigurd loved me, he would not lie there
Cold in the grasp of death, we two had sat
Throned on the ruins of your house, but he
Had ceased to love me, would not break his oaths
To you, who broke the oaths he swore to me.
Fooled by an evil charm, my love forgot
Our sweet betrothal; how could I forget
That Sigurd once had loved me? There he lies,
That was the only way to right the past,
And he had done me wrong; yet, I could weep
Would weeping help, but words and tears are vain,
I rather choose to bear me as his bride.

HAGEN. Accursed art thou, of gods and men accursed;
Black are thy deeds, monstrous, and horrible.
BRUNH. I never sought to please thee with my deeds.
HAGEN. 'T were well to slay thee here beside his corse.
BRUNH. And wherefore? Was it for my sake he shed
His blood? or did he keep to me the oaths
That he had sworn? Was it upon my foes
His mighty sword flashed death? and for my love
He fell from all the greatness of his birth,
The greatness of his purpose, or for you?
Alas! great Prince, thy deeds are all forgot,
And only I remember.
GUDRUN. Let them rave
And wrangle; 't is the use of murderers.
But, Giselher, no blood is on your hand,
You're good, you're true, my brother. Look at him,
That's all that's left of Sigurd. Think of it,
He was the greatest man in all the world.
BRUNH. Be still, vain girl, nor venture to intrude
Thy noisy grief upon our solemn close,
And final consummation. Stand aside;
What was this man to thee? Mine, mine he was;
Mine in the primal glory of his youth
Ere darkness fell upon the godlike eyes,
Mine in his death. Sigurd, my lord, I come,
Thus wedded to thee by the great high priest,
Thy wife forever. (stabs herself.)
LORDS etc. O! the queen! the queen!
GUNTER. Take hold upon her.
BRUNH. Pause; the awful hand
Of death is laid upon my head, and I
Am consecrate to him.
HAGEN. Nay, help her not,
Accursed from her birth to be the bane
Of lordly heroes.
GUDRUN. Just, ye mighty gods,
Most just are ye; your vengeance is not slow.
ODDRUN. Great sister, awful in thy life and death,
Farewell, farewell!

BRUNH. Nay, do not mourn for me,
For lo! his kiss is warm upon my lips,
His dying kiss, and it and death have cleansed
My soul from its pollution. Here I stand
Once more great Odin's daughter as of old,
Once more the bride of Sigurd. Fare thee well,
Mid all this joy, my heart is sore for thee
Thus left amid the frenzied world alone.
GUNTER. Hast thou no word for me?
BRUNH. Yes; harken all
To the commands of death. Before the gate
Build a great pyre, and fence it round about
With golden shields. There let my lord be laid,
And place me close beside him, like a bride
Decked for her bridebed, let great Odin's sword
Be laid between us, and the funeral rites
Be fully paid. Nay, do not weep, great king,
I never loved you, Sigurd was my love;
Now I may lie beside him all unblamed,
May lie and sleep beside him. Nameless woe,
In which I have no part, and speechless grief,
And crimes that will not vex me in my grave
Stand clear before my eyes. Why should I tell
The fate ye have no art to turn aside?
Ye have frustrated all the helpful plans
Odin conceived to save this maddened earth
And to secure the sceptres of the gods,
And so Giuki's house is desolate,
As mine, and his, and Atli's.
GISELHER. Is there nought
In all the future, but unuttered woe
And frenzied struggles, unrequited toil
And hopeless desolation?
BRUNH. You and yours
Shall pass away in anguish, and the gods
Can find no hope with which to bless the world
Since he is slain and Odin's race is dead.
GISELHER. Then all is darkness.
BRUNH. Wait, I see a light
That shines in darkness; other than our light,

Other than mine and Sigurd's, for the night
Shall not take hold upon it, and a hope
That none shall blight, a joy that death itself
Shall never vanquish; be ye comforted,
For lo! a sun hath risen in the east,
And in his light the splendour of the gods
Shall pale, as stars that fade into the dawn.

(draws the dagger from her breast and falls on Sigurd's bier.)

HAGEN. This light I fear shall hardly guide our feet.

GISELHER. Woe she foretold, and death, and yet a hope.

GUNTER. Too soon she bowed her queenly head to death
Who was the pride and glory of the world.

BRUNH. Nay, all too long into this riddling life
Are men and women born to toil and weep,
Now shall I rest in quiet with my love. (dies)

HAGEN. Now, come what may, we two, my lord, will stand
Unshaken mid the shipwreck of the world.

GUNTER. In life or death I will not part from thee.

GISELHER. O! take me too into the solemn bond.

HAGEN. Thou wouldst not have a part in Sigurd's death.

GISELHER. Yet will I share the woe that must be borne.

HAGEN. Pause yet, and think; thy soul is free from guilt.

GISELHER. Guiltless, I take your guilt upon my head,
Living or dying, I will share your fate.

ODDRUN. O! let me lay my hand within your hands,
And tread with you the rocky path to death.

GISELHER. Come, sister, join us.

GUDRUN. Nay, my place is here.
Live you your lives; for my part, with the dead
I keep my faith, with him I side.

GUNTER. Behold;
The gods have stepped between thee and thy love.

GUDRUN. All things may crumble at their touch, but yet
They cannot shake my heart.

HAGEN. Yet, curse us not.

GUDRUN. I do not curse you, and I do not bless.
Keep you your league; behold, this is my friend.

# ATLI'S DEATH.

Diu vil michel êre was dâ gelegen tôt.
Die liute heten alle jâmer unde nôt.
Mit leide was verendet des küneges hôhzît,
Als ie diu liebe leide ze aller jungiste gît.

Der Nibelunge Nôt.

## DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

KING ATLI.

ORSIC, *his general.*

DIETRICH, *exiled, afterwards restored King of Bern.*

HILDEBRAND, *one of his followers.*

KING GUNTER.

HAGEN, GISELHER } *his brothers.*

GUDRUN, *sister to King Gunter, wife to Atli.*

ODDRUN, *sister to King Atli, in love with Gunter.*

HERKIA, *Atli's concubine.*

LYDIA, *slave to Gudrun.*

*Lords, attendants, women &.*

# Act I.

**Scene I.** Atli's court. ATLI, LORDS, and ATTENDANTS.

ATLI. Albeit the tempest-stirring voice of war,
The tread of armies, the discordant shrieks
And shouts of battle, and the angry roar
Of blazing towns that flame into the night
Make sweetest music in a soldier's ears;
Although the helm be easier than the crown,
And these light robes of peace and sovereignty
Hang heavy on the limbs that lately bore
The panzer and the shield; yet, since our feet
Have trampled on the glories of our foes,
And from the terror of our name went forth
A desolation, and our words became
A breath of fire to consume their towns
And char their fields, till not a man was left
To curse our conquering armies as they passed,
'T is meet we pause, and rest us from the joys
And toils of battle.

(Trumpet without.)

Ha! What sound is that?

(Enter Attendant.)

ATTEND. A messenger from Orsic waits without.

ATLI. Give him admittance.

(Exit Attendant.)

It may be, my lords,
That we shall have to don our helms again.

(Enter Messenger.)

MESS. The noble Orsic greets his gracious lord
And master, royal Atli, by the name
Of ruler, even to the Western Sea.

ATLI. For this good news, go freely choose and take
Of all my share of spoil what likes thee best,
And of my horses take which pleaseth thee,
Save only my own steed.
MESS. Thanks mighty King.
ATLI. But where is Orsic?
MESS. Even at the gates
With the most mighty of his lords, the rest
Will come ere night.
ATLI. Then go, and eat, and rest.
'T is meet no lesser tongue than his should tell
The story of such deeds.
(Exit Messenger attended. Shouts and trumpets without.)
A LORD. My lord, he comes.
ATLI. Go forth, and welcome him.
(Exeunt several Lords. Music. Enter Orsic, Lords, and Attendants.)
Welcome most noble Orsic, your great deeds
Silence our tongues. so much do they outsound
Our loudest words of praise. Give me your hand.
ORSIC. My lord, with deep submission at your feet
We lay the conquests that your name has made.
ATLI. What, you have learned to flatter in the North;
The name was fairly spoken when it reached
The Western Sea. But tell us all the tale.
ORSIC. My lord, it little fits a soldier's tongue
To vaunt his deeds. Enough not one is left
Of all that dared oppose your might; the rest
Our captives and our spoil shall speak.
ATLI. I trust
That you have singers too amid your host
Less chary of their words, for noble deeds
Deserve a noble story.
ORSIC. When a sword
Goes whizzing with a thump upon a shield,
It makes the rhyme that suits my fancy best;
I understand no other. But, my lord,
Before the rest we hastened to your throne,
Not to anticipate their meed of praise,
But to receive our royal lord's commands
As to the spoil and captives. We have brought

Of fighting men four hundred, these were but
The noblest of their lands, the rest we slew.
ATLI. Make a strict search; if any priest be there,
Or any man well skilled in healing arts,
Such bring to me. Before the outer camp
Build a great altar to the God of War;
There, when the drums and trumpets shall announce
Our evening banquet, let the rest be slain.
What have ye more?
ORSIC. Nine hundred yellow-haired
And blue-eyed girls.
ATLI. Let our great queen, Gudrun,
Choose from them whom she will, and part the rest
Among you.
ORSIC. Furthermore, great store of spoil,
Five hundred waggons creak beneath its weight.
ATLI. That too divide among you.
(Enter Gudrun and Attendants.)
GUDRUN. Most gracious Atli, if with eager haste
Unsummoned and importunate, I break
Upon thy counsels and these noble lords',
Forgive me, since the news I bring is great.
ATLI. Speak on, Gudrun, methinks the saddest news
Should lose its sharpest sting, the gladdest find
New honey in the sweetness of thy tongue.
GUDRUN. Whether to call it glad or sorrowful
I know not, a delight to joy the heart,
Or a just cause for mournful sighs and tears,
But this I know that none shall hear the tale
Unmoved; yet if I tell it with a smile
I wrong the dead, if with a tear I wrong
Thy friendship and the living. My first word
Will thrill thy heart with rapture, and my next
Pierce it with pain. Prepare thyself, great King,
For joy and sadness, blended loss and gain,
A cup of mingled sweets and bitterness,
Yet offered by the wife that loves thee well.
ATLI. Speak on, my Queen, we wait to hear thy tale.
GUDRUN. Ah! could I tell it as 't was told to me,
Hadst thou but seen, the mighty hero's cheeks

All dashed with tears, and heard his lordly voice
Broken, the while the iron-sinewed breast
Convulsive heaved like tempest-troubled seas,
O! then, great Atli, joy and woe had grown
One tide of pity in thy heart, and thou
Wouldst sure have fallen on his neck and wept.

ATLI. Whom dost thou speak of?

GUDRUN. Wherefore should I pause?
Atli is great enough to hear the truth,
And joy and sorrow on his steadfast mind
Strike vainly as the sunshine and the rain
On the firm rock.

ATLI. Ay, doubt it not, speak on.

GUDRUN. And wherefore too should Atli be a king,
Compassed by crowds of heroes whose great names
Are as a trumpet-note to fright the world;
Why should his coffers be upheaped with gold,
His armour studded o'er with costly gems,
And I, his wife, decked out in priceless robes,
If he be all too weak to aid his friend,
Too poor, to help him in his poverty?—
Why do I plead?—The king's heart pleads for me.
Atli is brave, he will not fear the end;
Is strong and rich, he will not count the cost;
Is generous, will not reckon what he gave.

ATLI. For whomsoe'er thou speakst, though he hath been
My enemy, his cause shall be mine own
Whate'er thy suit, save one, I grant it thee.
Now tell thy tale.

GUDRUN. Ah! wherefore did I shrink?
I,—I that knew the noble Atli's heart;
Now will I speak, with smiles upon my lips,
Tears in my eyes, as best befits the tale,
And tell thee, noble Dietrich is returned!

ATLI. Dietrich of Bern?—Why this is joy, pure joy.

GUDRUN. Alas! my lord, he comes not as he went.

ATLI. So he be come, that is enough for me.

GUDRUN. Alas! alas! When from the court he rode,
After our bridal feast, around him thronged
A crowd of heroes; he returns alone.

For some have fallen in the battle storm,
And some are captive in a stranger land,
And some are dead by perils of the deep,
And some by hunger, cold, and weariness;
But all are lost.
We found him standing by his famished steed,
Himself more wasted still; with steadfast eyes
He seemed to read the ripples of the brook,
Or count the snowy pebbles of its bed;
And scarcely could we wake him from his trance,
And much ado we had, my lord, before
He was persuaded hither to thy court.
And thus, defeated, broken, worn, and spent,
Thy friend returns.

ATLI. But that my heart is sad
For all the lordly heroes that are lost,
And for the griefs that he himself hath borne,
By all the gods, I could be almost glad
That he has come without a single man
To try me in his need. O! let him come
And sit beside me here; my might is his.
Why does he linger?

GUDRUN. Good my noble Lord,
Were it not well to meet him first alone?
A heart thus bruised is as an open wound,
The kindest touch may hurt it. If he sees
Thee here, surrounded with these noble lords,
The great companions of thy Southern wars.
And the victorious Orsic, his sick thought,
Not envious of their greatness but bowed down
By his afflictions, may compare his loss
With all their gains, and double thus his woes.
'For these', his heart will urge, 'these are, indeed,
'Fit friends for Atli, each of them has brought
'New fame and conquest to his noble name,
'While I alone have squandered what he gave,
'While I alone appear before his face
'A beggar, with no gift within my hand'.

ATLI. Wise are thy words, Gudrun; my lords retire,
Within an hour we will meet again.
Orsic, bear thou our message to the camp.

(Exeunt Orsic, Lords, and Attendants.)

GUDRUN. And good my lord, thus broken as he is,
Ask not the story of his overthrow.
Deal gently with him.

ATLI. Fear it not, my Queen,
What Dietrich did or suffered, well I know
Was greatly done and borne. That is enough.

(Enter Dietrich of Bern. Exit Gudrun.)

Welcome, my friend, my brother!

DIETR. Gracious King,
Those names are ominous; my friends are dead,
My brothers languish in captivity.

ATLI. One lives to clasp thee to his breast, his might
Is thine, and he is strong to succour thee.

DIETR. Atli!

ATLI. My brother?

DIETR. Knowst thou that of all
Thou gavest me, not a single man is left?

ATLI. I know it all.

DIETR. With empty hands I come,
Nothing I bring but many wants and griefs.

ATLI. We'll soothe thy griefs, thy wants shall be supplied.

DIETR. How shall I thank thee?

ATLI. Wherefore hast thou grown
A stranger to me, thou whom I alone
Of all men call my friend? Why wouldst thou make
So strict a separation of our goods?
Hast thou forgotten all our joyous youth,
Our mighty deeds, our close companionship,
That thou shouldst dream that I, thy brother sworn,
Would fail thee in thy need?

DIETR. Since those glad days,
Alas! how strangely different are our fates;
From conquest unto conquest, with swift steps,
From glory unto glory thou hast sped,
And I stand here an outcast.

ATLI. Not the less
A mighty hero, Dietrich. What we do
But faintly shadows forth the things we are;
Our lives are but the reflex of ourselves

Cast upon troubled waters, broken oft,
Distorted, half effaced by waves of chance,
No measure of the man.
DIETR. Why then in vain
We speak of greatness and of littleness,
Wisdom and folly, innocence and guilt,
Seeing we judge men only by their deeds.
ATLI. Ay, Dietrich, we may judge of strangers so,
E'en as we judge of those we have not seen
By a poor picture, when we know the man
We cast aside the picture; thee I know.
DIETR. Ah! dost thou know me? Do I know myself?
Great plans and purposes have I conceived,
And many things have borne, and some have done.
And lo! the sum of all my toilsome life
Is simple failure.
ATLI. Thy distempered mind,
Sickened by many griefs, may judge it thus,
The vulgar thus account it, but the great
Know, there is something better than success,
And something worse than failure. Thou hast been
Great in thy actions and thy purposes;
Say thou hast failed;—'t is better thus to fail
Than to succeed as others. Pause and think;
Sigurd is dead, yet Gunter reigns in peace;
Brunhilda buried, Hagen lives and thrives.
DIETR. My friend, forget that great and mournful tale,
Not ours the guilt that Odin's great design
Was then frustrated.
ATLI. Ay, forget, forget!
But how?
Each day it thrusts itself into my life,
Each night it breaks in horror on my dreams,
That crime hath jarred our lives, confused our deeds,
Turned nobleness to scorn, undone the world;—
There lies the secret of our riddled fate,
The cause of all thy failure, and the cause
That all my life is wasted utterly.
DIETR. Why triumph waits upon thee, all the gods

Are lavish to thee. Thy great name has grown
The terror of the world.

ATLI. The terror, yes,
For desolation follows at my heels,
And curses are my blessings. I have might;—
But it lies useless in my hand, as pearls
Are to the shipwrecked sailor ocean-tost.
What purpose has it served? What noble end
Have I attained? What good has Atli done?
What can he hope for? Yet my wayward heart
Cries out for war and will not be appeased,
And so I pass, like some death-bringing storm,
Across the world.—I think that thou alone
Of all mankind dost love me.

DIETR. Nay, the queen—

ATLI. Is noble, faithful, trusts me;—but her heart
Sleeps in the grave of Sigurd.

DIETR. Nay, my lord—

ATLI. I do not blame her, he was more than I,
Nor hers the guilt, nor therefore do I mourn;—
But had he ruled us, as he should have ruled,
Were we the faithful vassals of his throne
And of Brunhilda's, then thou hadst not failed,
Then had I been a glory to the world
And not its terror—and the men who wrought
This ruin, Dietrich, why they rule in peace.

DIETR. O! dream not, friend, of vengeance; stand aside,
Nor dare to weave thy life into their fate;
Surely in this the mighty gods themselves
Suffered the deepest wrong; let them avenge,
And wait their time.

ATLI. Why I have waited long—
These seven long years;—and every day I thought
A messenger shall bring the joyous news
That some dark fate, monstrous, impossible,
Has swept them from the earth. Yet still they live.
Our gods grow tame and meek, unless they strike
And speedily, methinks, their names shall be
A scoff, and beardless boys shall mock at them,

Children profane their altars, and old men
Smile when they tell how once they prayed to them.

DIETR. Think, Hagen is the brother of the queen.

ATLI. Why so I do, and he is safe for me;
For she is noble, gracious, passing fit
To be the wife of Atli, if he were
What but for that great crime he might have been.

(Trumpets and shouts without. Enter Gudrun.)

GUDRUN. My lord, the Northern army has arrived,
It waits for your commands.

ATLI. Then must I go
And leave great Dietrich to you, tender him
As if he were my brother.

(Exit Atli.)

GUDRUN. May it please you view our gardens, since you left
I've spent much pains upon them.

DIETR. By your leave.

(Exeunt Gudrun and Dietrich to the garden. Enter Herkia.)

HERKIA. Ay, ay, walk on; the flowers are sweet forsooth,
And it is passing sweet to be a queen;
But I know something sweeter yet.—Not love
That passes in a whirlwind;—no, but hate
That stays.
To bear for years sharp wrong, contempt, and scorn
With down cast eyes and patient seeming face,
To serve, to fawn, to answer haughty words
With humble looks, to crouch,—and then to spring.
For seven long years I waited; who so meek
As Herkia? Now I have you, haughty Queen.
And I have borne—ye gods, what have I borne!—
Have seen her seated by my lover's side,
Her children thrust my child from out his place;
I did not curse, I smiled and bode my time,
And a time comes for vengeance if one waits.
My time is come. Ay, linger there among
Your roses, they are sweet; a sudden fall,
Disgrace and shame, men's gibes, and jests, and sneers
Are bitter; I have tasted them and know.
And you shall taste them. Yes, to-day, to-day,

Gudrun shall quail in Atli's wrathful glance,
Shall blush amid his nobles' scornful jeers,
Shall weep amid the laughter of the court
And tamely bear my mocking. Yes, the girl
That stood so humbly still behind your chair
Has learnt to play on Atli's awful soul
As on a harp, and now she strikes the string
That rings destruction, for her day has come.

(Exit Herkia. Enter Dietrich and Gudrun.)

GUDRUN. Nay, Dietrich, you have might upon his heart,
O! use it for this purpose; charm away
His hatred of my brothers, bring about
This marriage; truly Gunter and Oddrun
Live but for one another, and thou knowst
Such was the primal purpose of the gods.

DIETR. Ay, part of that great purpose that was wrecked
When Sigurd fell and great Brunhilda died;
That cannot be accomplished.

GUDRUN. Not in full,
Alas! the dead return not from their graves,
But should we therefore pour new bitterness
On the old woe?—with hasty passion add
To the confusion of our tangled lives?
O! rather let us save what still is ours,
And strive to knit again some broken threads
Of the rent woof, and humbly wait the end.

DIETR. My gracious Queen, there are some deeds in life
Fraught with such dark and awful consequence
As cannot be amended, and some sins
That cannot be atoned for; that was one.

GUDRUN. But wherein, noble Dietrich, have I sinned?
My brothers laid the prince's hand in mine,
My mother bade me wed him, and what maid
Who had but seen the terrors of those eyes
Softened to tenderness, and heard that voice
Speak pleadingly of love, would not have loved?

DIETR. Not yours the sin, dear lady, yet a sin
Was then committed, O! a flagrant sin
That set the music of the world ajar,
The subtle-toned harmony of life

Quite out of tune, and every one of us
Works out that sin in his discordant deeds;
And much of all this woe has Atli borne,
Dear was Brunhilda to his heart.

GUDRUN. And I—
Have I borne nothing? Ah! my lord, my woe
Was surely most of all; for on my breast
Great Sigurd lay, encircled by my arms,
What time the death-blow struck him.—Bear with me.
You know, my lord, I loved him, and indeed
I was his wife; by wrong, perchance you say,
But still his chosen wife, and yet the queen,
That beauteous terror whom I cannot love
In spite of all your praise, stepped in between
My love and me, e'en in the parting hour;
His dying hand was clasped within her hand,
His dying eyes were fixed upon her face.
I saw them bear the bodies from the hall
And lay them on one pyre, as if their death
Had been a second bridal; I was left,
O! doubly widowed, doubly desolate,
Robbed of the past and future at one blow,
In one short hour.—Pardon me, my lord,
That I forget myself. You spoke of woe,
O! learn from me to suffer and forgive.

DIETR. I would, most gracious lady, that it lay
In me to grant your wish, but much I fear,
Atli will never yield to Gunter's suite.

GUDRUN. Would he had left me then to dwell with him,
Where every spot was fragrant of the past,
Sweet with the memories of my early love,
And dear to me for buried Sigurd's sake.

DIETR. Then had no children wakened in your heart
New hope and joy to smile away the past.

GUDRUN. Alas! my lord, such children as they bear
Whose hearts are buried.—But enough of this.
Yet thus much I will say, I did not wed
With the tempestuous Atli out of love,
Or lust of power, but for my brothers' sake;
For when the whirlwind of my rage was past

In which I cursed them, and I knew the whole
Of the sad story, then methought 't was best
To do what in me lay to mend the past,
And this I did. But see, my lord, 't is noon,
And I, discourteous hostess, tend my guest
With words alone.—May it please you follow me.

(Exeunt Dietrich and Gudrun. Enter Atli and Herkia.)

ATLI. Out of my sight, thou cunning, lying hag
Before I slay thee.

HERKIA. (going) If thy leave was asked
And freely granted, I am justly chid.

ATLI. Come back.

HERKIA. (returning) My lord?

ATLI. Now, down upon thy knees.
Confess 't was envy, jealousy, and hate
Prompted the monstrous lie. Quick, ere I strike.

HERKIA. (kneeling) If thou wilt slay me, Atli, for my love,
Why, I can bear the blow without a moan,
But, even at thy bidding, mighty King,
I cannot lie to thee.

ATLI. Why thou hast lied.

HERKIA. When?

ATLI. Now.

HERKIA. Nay, think so if thou wilt,
'T is one to me.

ATLI. Why, it is clear as day
That thou must hate her.

HERKIA. Wherefore?

ATLI. That she took
The place that was thine own before she came.

HERKIA. (rising) Nay, judge me as thou wilt, but let me go.

ATLI. It is impossible.

HERKIA. Then, good my lord,
It cannot be.

ATLI. Thou saidst that it was so.

HERKIA. The more fool I to speak; I might have known—

ATLI. Why dost thou pause? What?—What?

HERKIA. I must not speak.

ATLI. Speak freely all thy thought.
HERKIA. Then let me say
That thou hast done thy handmaid cruel wrong,
And all because she loves thee. Ask thyself,
Be thou thyself my witness,—when she came,
The queen, whom till to-day in truth I held
For truly noble, did I sulk or fret?
Some women in my place had stormed at thee,
Had sought to vex, traduce, and thwart thy wife;
But I—I nursed her children as my own—
Were they not thine? I waited on thy wife;
Studied her face to guess what she might wish,
Bowed to her humours, did my best, and all
For thy sake, Atli.
ATLI. That is but the truth.
HERKIA. Sometimes she used me harshly, I was still,
Sometimes she asked hard service, I obeyed,
Wrongly she chid, but I made no reply.
I never crossed her with a single word,
Nor spoke one ill word of her, nor in thought
Wronged her—Ah me!—I fear I speak too fast.—
I must confess that sometimes in my thought
I may have wronged her.
ATLI. How? and when? and why?
HERKIA. In this, great Atli, let me be excused,
My thoughts are mine, I never gave them breath.
ATLI. Yet I must know them.
HERKIA. Nay, my gracious lord,
I pray thy patience.
ATLI. I command thee, speak.
HERKIA. Dost thou command? then I must needs obey,
But be not angry with me; well I know
It ill befits a maid to judge her queen,
But still one thinks—and I have sometimes thought,
If I were Atli's wife my heart would meet
His passion with a wilder, tenderer love,—
Why she is cold, while all my soul would glow
And thrill with rapture if he gazed on me
As her.—'T was doubtless queenly dignity.
Thus far, I may have wronged her.

ATLI. Well speak on.
HERKIA. I have no more to say; now let me go;
But would my royal master hear my prayer,
I fain would beg him choose another maid
To wait upon the queen.
ATLI. Not so thou goest;
But wherefore should I choose another maid?
HERKIA. Nay, royal Atli, rate me not too low.
I know I am not chaste, pure as they call
Those girls whose sluggish passion calmly waits
The priest's permission, such may mock at me;—
But still, my lord, my bastard is thy son,
Thou hast no right to cast him in my teeth.
ATLI. Why all this passion?
HERKIA. True, my blood was fire
Enkindled by thine eyes, my heart was wax,
It melted at thy glance, I could not stand
On forms;—I loved the man and not the king;
And so thou hadst thy will. I took thy love
And with it all men's scorn; what did I care?
Nor ever have I rued it till to-day
In spite of all my wrongs, but now, alas!
I have my wage, for Atli mocks at me.
ATLI. What dost thou mean?
HERKIA. Why simply this, my lord,
I am no wanton that does serve for pay,
Or I would take the gold and keep the door,
And cough and smile by turns, and not be chid;
Such women are not scarce, fee one of them
To serve thy wife.
ATLI. False slanderer, dost thou dream
That thy base words, a bondslave's filthy tale,
Can taint the honour of the spotless queen.
HERKIA. I thought that truth was stronger than a lie
And it would stead me, rather did not think,
I only felt that Atli suffered wrong
And rushed to right him. Since it was a fault
I will not err again.
ATLI. It cannot be
That noble Dietrich thus would wrong his friend.

HERKIA. We read men's faces, but their hearts are hid.
ATLI. His have I read, and found it simple truth.
HERKIA. And mine?—Ah well! 't is but a woman's heart
Not worth the reading. Nay, think what thou wilt,
But let me go, for I must weep awhile.
ATLI. Not yet; if that thou liest, beware, beware.
HERKIA. Thee only, thee alone in all the world
I longed to serve, to please; alas! alas!
These tears will come. O! I am used to scorn,
To sneers, to cruel words, to biting jeers,
But not from Atli. It is hard, too hard.
ATLI. Methinks thou shouldst be true.
HERKIA. Nay I am false,
I never loved the cruel-hearted king,
I never cast away my maiden fame
To pleasure him, ne'er hung upon his lips,
I did not bear all gibes, do everything
Rather than lose my love from out my sight,
I have not risked my very life to-day
Rather than see thee wronged; nay I am false.
ATLI. Yet thou mayst err; thou saidst that thou didst see—
HERKIA. And I did see it.
ATLI. In the garden there?
HERKIA. In that rose-arbour.
ATLI. Nay, take heed, take heed;
E'en as the glowing furnace is my rage,
O! think not to escape if thou be false.
HERKIA. If that I lie, then slay me in thy hate.
ATLI. I will, I will. O! Dietrich is most true.
HERKIA. Since that my life is pawned, may I have leave
To reason with thee?
ATLI. Speak, I give thee leave.
HERKIA. Think then, the place and time convenient,
A lovely woman smiling with a sigh
A half consent; is Atli's blood so cold
He would not do even as Dietrich did?
I scarcely blame him.
ATLI. But the queen, the queen,
O! she is pure as is the virgin snow

Upon the mountain summit, pure and cold.
Above the scandals of the court she moves,
A moon above the clouds that stain her not.

HERKIA. How dull are men to read a woman's heart!
O! I could play the frosty matron well,
Be prudent, cold, and grandly dignified,
Did Dietrich woo me, but when Atli spoke
The case was changed. Another may prefer
Dietrich to Atli.

ATLI. All are not as thou.

HERKIA. Yet all have blood that tingles in the veins,
And lips that itch for kisses; ne'er a one
Would care to tell her brother all her dreams.

ATLI. Thou wrongst mankind, thou wrongst the very gods,
Is there no chastity in all the world,
Matronly truth, nor maiden modesty?

HERKIA. Nay plenty, O! the dullness of these men!
Your maiden modesty 's a pretty bait
To catch fine suitors. Yet the purest maid
That tender, innocent, and timorous thing
That drops her eyes, and speaks in whispered tones,
A very snow-drop trembling at a breath,
Will sun her beauty in the eyes of men,
Ay, and consider sagely, hour by hour,
What scarf or gem will catch their glances best.
And matrons; it may doubtless sometimes chance
One weds a man she loves, and so is chaste;
Some never find a lover to their minds
And so are chaste; but when the right man asks,
The woman yields or be she wife or maid.

ATLI. Wretch, if I thought that what thou speakst were true—
But no! 'T is false. Thou canst not understand
The chastity of a pure woman's soul,
Such as Brunhilda's was, such as Gudrun's.

HERKIA. Perhaps I cannot. But just ask yourself
Is any man the same unto his wife
As to his friend? Answer me; am I wrong?
Are not the men and women in the world

Two sets of maskers, where each dons the dress
Which, as it thinks, will lure the other most?
If so, King Atli, you may judge of men,
But let me judge of women.

ATLI. Well say on.

HERKIA. Lo! I have spoken what I should not speak,
Done what no woman in the world should do,
Have torn the veil that hides us from men's eyes,
And shown thee all our naked frailty. Shame
Should keep us silent, but love conquers shame;—
I love thee, Atli, and I saw thee wronged;
I have not spared myself, forgive me, love,
If that I cannot spare the queen and thee.

ATLI. Nay blacken all things, sweep away the bloom
From the sweet fruit of life; let us behold
The grinning skull beneath the maiden's smile,
And in the fragrance of the roses breath
Smell nothing but the dung.

HERKIA. Shall I pause here?

ATLI. Nay, since so much is spoken, tell the rest.

HERKIA. You think, because the queen is cold to you
She must be chaste. Tastes differ; for my part,
I love the dark, rough, fiery, southern wines,
The queen a sweeter vintage. It may be
Our tastes in men may differ. Thus perchance
She does not like the colour of your beard,
Your nose, your eyes, your lips; perchance your gait
Offends her or your voice. At any rate
'T is clear she does not love you, far less clear
She may not love another. Be a man,
And dare to face the truth. Look on her eyes,
Have they no fire? her cheeks, have they no glow?
Those lips were made for kissing. I could laugh
To see you thus incredulous. O no!
She has no taste for dainties. Why, a child
Will push aside the food it does not like
And surfeit upon sweetmeats. Be assured
The queen is but a woman after all.

ATLI. If what thou sayst be true, by all the gods,
'T were better she had clasped a burning coal

To her sweet breast, had grasped a two-edged sword
Than thus have wronged me.
HERRIA. Nay, I will confess,
If I were wed to thee and loved thee not,
And if I met a man that I could love,
Why, I would kiss and so forth. Nay and more,
If it could chance that I should meet a man
Whom I loved more than I love thee, why then
I should be his, just as I now am thine,
A thing to fondle, play with, cast aside,
To use, to slay, just as it liked him best;
And every wife on earth would do the same.
ATLI. Why, in the midst of all my raging life
I kept one little piece of holy ground,
One sacred spot of quiet in my heart,—
Ye gods, ye gods, I shall become a fiend.
HERRIA. Yet still there is a hope, for love is strong,
It burns the stains from out a woman's heart,
It frees her from her dross; such love is mine.
ATLI. Ay, but the queen, the queen;—she loves me not,
And O! I took her for the purest thing
That trod the earth. 'T is true that she was cold,
I thought it was a chill from Sigurd's grave,
But then with Dietrich.—Proof—I will have proof.
Bring me some proof!
HERRIA. Nay, 't is a game my lord
That's played in secret. What I saw, I saw
Purely by chance; trust me, I was not called.
ATLI. Then I must trust thy single word.
HERRIA. Come here;
From hence one sees the arbour-seat, from hence
I saw what I have told thee.
ATLI. Thou alone,
There was no other witness.
HERRIA. Had I known
Thou didst delight in shame, I might have called
A hundred; for thy sake I held my peace.
ATLI. 'T was well.—But only on thy simple word,
All men would laugh at me.

HERKIA. Nay hush it up;
If thou art pleased, why let them have full scope,
It hurts not me.
ATLI. I'll hush them into such a silence, girl,
As none shall break. But first I must have proof;—
I fear—I hope thou liest.
HERKIA. Why should I lie?
For profit?—More of gold were surely gained
By silence than by speech. For love of thee?
I know thou wilt not wed me, and I know
That thou wilt wed again; another wife
With more of love might have more jealousy,
And so might part me from thee.
ATLI. Never more!
My place from henceforth is the troublous camp,
My marriage-couch the corpse-bepiled plain,
My rest the storm, my peace the rush of war,
My music piercing shrieks and dying groans;
Nay, as a tempest will I lash the world
With my swift fury.
HERKIA. Wheresoe'er thou art
I will be with thee—dress me as a boy
And share thy tent, thy dangers, and thy grave.
ATLI. A fiend—a beautiful and lying fiend,
A lovely devil!—Give me proof, I say;
I will have blood, blood, blood, a woman's blood,
Or hers or thine.
HERKIA. Confront me with the queen
And let her answer, but remember this
That she and Dietrich both will lie—must lie
Since they have done it.
ATLI. Fetch her quickly; go.
(Exit Herkia)
It cannot be. But yet the girl is meek,
Simple, and honest, and he has a touch
Of Sigurd in his face;—she pleaded for him
As never for another—her dark race
Is false and cunning. I have been too bold
In my free trust of Dietrich. She is right,
The best of men are men; the blood rebels

When that false bawd, sleek opportunity,
Opens the door to passion. Women too
Are made of flesh that thrills and blood that glows,
Even as men. The chastest, as she says,
Dream of forbidden joys. It cannot be,
Yet, if some mischief-maker told the queen
Of certain stories in our latest wars,
Would she not cry: 'It is impossible!'
Just as I do to this. I will be wise
And put no trust in possibilities,
In oaths of friendship, or in women's tears,
I will have truth, and then, by all the gods,
Vengeance most fierce and bloody.

(Enter GUDRUN and HERKIA)

GUDRUN. (to Herkia) Learn better manners and a softer tone,
Such bearing ill becomes your place.
HERKIA. (to Gudrun) Indeed!
ATLI. Why, 't is the same old face, the same pure face;
There is no taint upon the brow, no taint
Within the eyes — why, the whole face is pure.
GUDRUN. My lord?
ATLI. I will not trust to looks, for many a wife
Makes sweetest modesty the mask of sin,
And yet the gods endure it.
GUDRUN. Good my lord,
I cannot guess the meaning of these words.
ATLI. There is a trace of tears upon thy cheeks;
Hadst thou the grace to weep then for thy fault
That hadst no grace to shun it?
GUDRUN. For my fault?—
(to Herkia) Begone why stand you listening there.
HERKIA. (to Gudrun) Ha! ha!
I must begone forsooth; the queen would coax
And wheedle; by your leave, I'll stay awhile!
GUDRUN. (to Herkia) Nay mend your manners and take heed.
HERKIA. (to Gudrun) Take heed
And mend your morals.

(Gudrun strikes at Herkia, Atli holds her hand)

GUDRUN. My lord, unhand me.

ATLI. Nay, not yet, not yet.
First stand and answer me.
GUDRUN. My lord, no force,
Let go my hand.
ATLI. (dragging her to the window) So thou art bold and proud,
Wilt brave it out; but I have something here
Will make thee tamer.
GUDRUN. Noble Dietrich! Help!
The king is mad.
HERKIA. You hear, my lord, she calls her paramour.
GUDRUN. My paramour!
HERKIA. I said so. Pardon me,
If I have told a secret.
GUDRUN. O ye gods!
(Enter Dietrich)
DIETR. My lord, you do yourself most grievous wrong
Thus to forget yourself.
ATLI. What right hast thou
To step between me and my wife?
DIETR. The right
Of truest friendship. Shall I see thee do
A foolish deed which ere the night is come
Thyself wilt mourn most deeply, and be still
From fear to meet thy rage? I rather say,
Braving thy anger out of love to thee
E'en as I would thy foe, thou actest ill,
Forgetst thy dignity, thy nobleness
In brutish rage. Restrain thyself, great King;
If thou hast cause for anger, weigh it well
And state it calmly; hurried action makes
Small ills incurable, wise counsel finds
A cure for deepest evils. In pure love
I speak both to the queen and thee.
ATLI. Pure love!
Nay choose between us Dietrich. — She or I.
O! It was base, most base.
DIETR. What monstrous deed
Is laid unto her charge,—as I could swear
Most falsely? Since you parted tenderly
She has not left my sight.

GUDRUN. O! we are wronged,
Most basely wronged.
ATLI. In thee I put my trust,
In thee alone; the others I have ruled,
But thee I loved. Yet think not to escape,
Love turned to hate is bitter, fierce, and strong,
And it shall overthrow thee.
DIETR. Me? I too
Am suddenly cast from thy warmest love
Into thy deepest hatred?
ATLI. She is fair,
How do you like her Dietrich? Why those lips
Were made for kissing. They are very sweet;
A little cold, perhaps, at least to me,
How do you like them?
DIETR. My most gracious lord —
ATLI. 'T was not her beauty then; ay, but she held
My heartstrings in those little hands of hers,
Could open it at will; you wanted gold,
You wanted men— she seemed the shortest way—
DIETR. Surely some sudden frenzy must have seized
His mind, he raves.
ATLI. Nay, take her, lead her forth,
But not that way, not to the garden there
With its rose-arbour—no, the other door
That leads amid the taunts and jeers of men
Up to the scaffold.
DIETR. But that on thy brow
Gather dark clouds of mingled rage and grief,
Thy words would move my laughter.
ATLI. Nay laugh out;
For thou canst laugh no doubt, and she can weep,
And both can lie—
DIETR. My lord, my lord, beware—
GUDRUN. Hush Dietrich! you and I stand here accused
Of—O! I cannot speak it.
HERKIA. (to Atli) Mark you not
How like a petted dog he barks or fawns
Just as she bids him.

DIETR. My most gracious King,
If that the queen or I withal be charged
With any fault, be just, and let us hear
The accusation, see the witnesses,
And then have leave to answer. Judge as not
Without a hearing.
HERKIA. (to Atli) They will tell one tale
And so outweigh my single word, and swear—
Who would not swear a lie to save his life?—
Or Dietrich in his rage will murder me.
ATLI. Stand thou on that side, stand ye two on this;
Now tell thy tale.
DIETR. Speak on.
HERKIA. Nay, you will blush
To hear that which you did not blush to do,
Or rather blushed and did.
GUDRUN. Must I be still
And hear myself thus wronged?
HERKIA. A greater wrong
You did the king.
GUDRUN. By all the gods I swear—
DIETR. Nay, gracious lady, let her tell her tale.
HERKIA. You thought that no one saw you there alone
In the rose-arbour; but I saw— I saw.
DIETR. What did you see? Speak on; we wait to hear.
HERKIA. All that you did there with the wicked queen.
DIETR. What did I do?
HERKIA. So. you will brave it out,
You are not conscience-stricken. Shall I then
Retell the story of your joys, dilate,
Particularize the manner of the act?
O! shame upon you.
ATLI. (aside) Sure a simple girl,
Untaught, untutored, could not bear her thus
Unless her tale were true.
HERKIA. The rose you bear
Upon your breast she gave you afterwards.
DIETR. The rose she gave me, but by all the gods,
I swear the rest of the vile tale is false,
And though a thousand swear it, it is false.

HERKIA. (to Atli) You see he fears that others may have seen.
GUDRUN. I join myself in noble Dietrich's oath,
And may the awful gods hurl on my head
Swift desolation, sudden shame and death
If that I lie.
HERKIA. You swore a marriage oath,
And that is broken.
GUDRUN. Base and lying slave!
DIETR. What Atli, wilt thou take a bondmaid's tale
Against my plighted word and solemn oath,
And rather trust that woman than thy wife?
HERKIA. I told thee, gracious King, they'd bear them thus,
When did I lie to thee? Is it my fault
That I am but a woman and a slave?
O! that some god would now make clear the tale,
And prove my truth.
ATLI. 'T is vain, your oaths are vain;
The gods are slow to punish perjured oaths,
They grow of late so very dignified
That men may coin their names on any lie
And pass it current. Those that thus will sin
Will lie to hide their sin—for honour's sake
Must lie—but if 't is false, draw thou thy sword
For I declare it true, and only thus
Can we decide it. (draws)
DIETR. (draws) In the mighty gods
Who see the justice of my cause I trust.
GUDRUN. Nay, Dietrich, hold; this Atli is thy friend,
Thy sworn companion; drop thy sword for shame,
Is every oath forgotten?
HERKIA. (to Atli) Lo! she fears
To trust the outcome.
DIETR. Great and noble Queen,
Thou speakest truth. Atli, I dare not draw
My sword against thee for thou art my friend,
My benefactor, and my brother sworn;
But place before me any other man
And I will fight this battle to the last.
ATLI. 'T is a safe boast; what hero of my court
Can match with thee?

GUDRUN. If one most deeply wronged
Have right to speak, then, mighty Atli, hear
The words of her that once was dear to thee,
The mother of thy children, slandered now
By a most perjured, base, designing slave
And let, most noble Dietrich, but this once
A woman right thine honour and her own.
Great Atli, bid the holy priests prepare
The sacred caldron, bid them raise its glow
To thrice the wonted heat, and fence it round
With thrice the wonted spells. Lo! I appeal
To the high gods for judgment; should they fail
To save me, I am lost. Let Dietrich here
And me be bound. If that I do not lift
With scathless hand the pebble from the depths
Slay us, for we are guilty.
ATLI. Darest thou brave
This awful risk?
GUDRUN. I dare.
ATLI. I am content.
DIETR. And so am I; my lord, receive my sword.
ATLI. It shall be so; let Herkia too be bound.
HERKIA. (aside) I like it not, but I must brave it out
And hope the awful gods will take a nap;
And though the worst should come, they shall not save
The queen from my fierce vengeance, Oddrun's shame
Is still untold, which spoken shall arouse
Wild storms of rage in Atli to o'erwhelm
The princess and her lover, and, I think,
The queen to boot.—(aloud) Yes. I too am content.

**Scene II.** Interior of a temple. In the back ground a raised platform with steps, two altars with fire; between them and somewhat further back a furnace and caldron. Priests and Attendants with torches.

FIRST ATTEND. Caught did you say?
SECOND ATTEND. Ay, in the very nick.
THIRD ATTEND. So ice you see will melt.
FOURTH ATTEND. 'T is like to melt
When it comes near that fire.

THIRD ATTEND. O! we shall see
A sight to make a twelve months merry talk!
FIFTH ATTEND. Dietrich's a pretty man.
THIRD ATTEND. The more fool he
Who trusts him with his wife.
SIXTH ATTEND. You fool the king.
THIRD ATTEND. She fooled him as it seems.
SIXTH ATTEND. 'T is like to prove
A bitter jest.
FIFTH ATTEND. Ay, and a burning shame.
SEVENTH ATTEND. A crying shame, Sir, and a biting jest,
You'll hear the bashful queen confess her love,
And then we'll put the loving pair to bed
Amid the asps and vipers.
THIRD ATTEND. In the tower?
SEVENTH ATTEND. Ay, in the serpents-tower; it is decreed.

(Trumpets. Enter Atli, Orsic and Lords.)

ATTENDANTS. Long live the king!

(Atli examines the altars and caldron, and proceeds to his throne.)

ATLI. Bring in the prisoners.

(Enter Gudrun and Dietrich bound and guarded, afterwards Herkia bound and guarded.)

THIRD ATTEND. See how pale she is.
GUDRUN. (aside) Ye mighty gods, remember not this day
My knowledge of my brother's guilty love,
But only that of which I am accused.
(aloud) Great Atli, my most noble lord and King,
I, wrongly charged, from thee do make appeal
To the high gods for judgment.
SECOND ATTEND. On my word,
She puts a bold face on it.
THIRD ATTEND. Wait awhile.
ATLI. Unbind the queen.

(Gudrun advances to the foot of the platform)

HERKIA. (aside) I do not like that look. What if indeed
The gods should intervene?—Yet have I poured
Such subtle poison into Atli's soul
As shall work on, until it works her death.

OLD PRIEST. (from the platform) Gudrun, thou daughter of Giuki's house,
King Gunter's sister, formerly the bride
Of Sigurd, now King Atli's wedded wife,
I bid thee pause. If in thy secret soul
Thou knowst that thou art guilty of this sin,
Think not to hide it from the gods, their eyes
Have seen thine actions, read thy secret thoughts;
Dost thou persist in thy demand?

GUDRUN. I do.

(The priest retires. Gudrun advances to the caldron and stands behind it.)

O! ye most awful rulers of the Earth
Who sit in judgment on the deeds of men,
Hear now my cry; a woman, deeply wronged,
Maligned, an injured mother, wife, and queen,
Raises her voice, and lifts her feeble hands
In humble supplication to your thrones
For judgment not for mercy. Have I sinned
Against my noble lord in word or deed,
Then pour deep vengeance on me.—If in thought,
In secret wish I ever did him wrong,
Save only that my heart hath sometimes dwelt
Upon the buried Sigurd and the past,
Be pitiless in judgment, let me die;
But since indeed my inmost soul is pure,
Be with me in this trial; look on me,
Judge me, and make the sentence clear to all;
Forbid the flame to hurt me with its heat,
The charm to blight me with its curse, the fumes
To blind me with their darkness;—O! ye gods,
Ye righteous gods, in whom I put my trust,
Be just and save.

(Gudrun lifts a white stone from the caldron.)

ATLI. Most noble woman, spotless wife and Queen;
My brother, I have wronged thee.

HERKIA. (aside) If I might speak with him alone, the game
Were not yet lost. I have one truth to tell
Might pay for many lies, and snatch the queen
From her safe place. I chose the shortest way,

That was the surest. But if here I hint
That Atli's sister sleeps in Gunter's arms,
They are forewarned, and so my rage is balked.—
I must gain time and dare the cruel flames.

ATLI. Now Herkia didst thou lie.

HERKIA. I did not lie.

ATLI. Go to the caldron then and prove thy truth.

THIRD ATTEND. Now we shall see a bit of fun at last.

FIRST ATTEND. Hush! hush! this jesting ill befits the scene.

HERKIA. (aside, advancing) 'T is only fire, 't will burn, and that is all;
Is that so hard to bear? One sudden pang
Hid by a smiling face and I am safe;
I will be firm.
But how the hungry flames do lick the sides
Of the red caldron, while the cursed broth
Bubbles around the brim.—Or this or death,—
It must be done!—Three times the wonted heat,
Three times the wonted anguish.—Ah! they laugh
To see me pause and tremble—I will on—
O woe!
My feet are weak and falter—I grow blind
And giddy (falls). Is no pity in your souls?
Nay I confess—I lied—the tale was false.

ATLI. Bind her and lead her forth to death, but first
Let every torture rack her.

(Exit Herkia guarded.)

Noble lords
And gentlemen, on to the banquet hall.

(Exeunt Gudrun, Dietrich, Orsic, Lords and Attendants. A Priest stops Atli as he is about to leave.)

PRIEST. She swears, my lord, that she will not entreat
Your clemency—would only speak with you,
So much, methinks, my lord, 't were well to grant.

ATLI. Well, bring her in.

(Exit Priest.)

Bid Orsic guard the gates.

(Exit Attendant. Enter Herkia bound and guarded.)

Unbind her.

(Herkia falls at Atli's feet.)

Quick, speak out; what wouldst thou say?

HERKIA. O! my dread lord, it is so hard to die!
I cannot speak—let me but hide my face
Beside thy feet, for see they glare on me
With tigereyes, they mock my fears, they laugh,
And jesting show the horrid instruments
That are to rend my flesh—O mighty King!
O Atli! thou hast loved me,—let me live—
Anywhere, only live!

ATLI. Was it for this
You bid me turn? You might have spared your breath,
You'll want it shortly.

HERKIA. O! my lord, my lord,
'T is such a simple, little thing I ask.
Nay do not turn from me, or they will come
And bear me to the awful lingering death.
And they will mock my writhings, drown my shrieks
In laughter—will not pity—they will tear
The body thou hast folded in thine arms,
O Atli! 't is a fearful thing to die!

ATLI. You should have pondered that before you dared
To play with Atli,—now it is too late.

HERKIA. Nay, I will grasp thy royal robes and cling
About thy feet for mercy.

ATLI. (spurning her) Bear her hence.

HERKIA. (rising) Then be it so; but listen first, harsh King;
Whate'er my fault, the father of my child
Has lost the right to judge me. Look to it,
Nature herself is outraged in my death.

ATLI. It is not I that judge thee but the gods.

HERKIA. O yes! the gods, those true and trusty friends
Of Atli's House, who with an outstretched arm
Did shield Brunhilda, and avenge the death
Of mighty Sigurd.

ATLI. Stay that lying tongue,
Each word it utters is a blasphemy.

HERKIA. It was not so then?—Ah! I had forgot;
Gunter has ease, and wealth, and fame, and power,
And Atli's sister for his concubine.

ATLI. Liar!

HERKIA. O yes! of course, Oddrun is chaste
As Gudrun knows, and the most mighty gods
Are faithful friends who truly have repaid
King Atli's service, so he loves them well.

ATLI. Bear her away to torture, see you crowd
All forms of anguish in her lingering death.

HERKIA. Nay be thyself the hangman. Come and tear
With thine own hands the warm and quivering flesh
From off the breast on which thy head has lain.

(Exit Atli.)

Ye gods! take vengeance on him.

FIRST EXEC. Now my dear
Are you ready?

SECOND EXEC. Come away, there's no one here
To mark your speech.

FIRST EXEC. Outside there are enough.

HERKIA. The game I played was high and it is lost,
So I must pay the stakes.—One joy is mine,
I think I have not fallen unavenged.
And yet;— (The executioners seize her.) O! awful, loathsome, hateful Death,
Come quickly, quickly! save me from their hands,
Save me from Atli.

(Herkia is dragged out. Enter Atli and Orsic.)

ATLI. You heard of this before?

ORSIC. Only a vague,
Uncertain rumour.

ATLI. Think you it is true?

ORSIC. Of that, my lord, I cannot judge.

ATLI. Oddrun
Hath ever borne her as a modest maid,
I cannot think t'is so, but yet indeed
Women are women, beautiful but frail;
We are too apt to trust them. Flesh is flesh
And we must guard against it. Therefore mark,
Since many unregarded incidents
Confirm this not impossible, go thou
And secretly observe them.—If 't is so—

ORSIC. What then, my lord?

ATLI. Then bid the goatish king
To feast with me; bid both his brothers come,
For I will make them such a festival
As never yet was spread.
ORSIC. But yet, my lord,
They are the brothers of your noble queen.
ATLI. I know it Orsic, but the outraged gods
Call out to me for vengeance, not alone
For this new story of my sister's shame,
But most of all for great Brunhilda's death
And murdered Sigurd; they are wrath with me,
And angrily they chide my base delay.
Oddrun must be the bait. Come, as we go,
I'll tell you fully how you shall proceed.

## Act II.

**Scene I.** Garden of King Gunter's summerpalace. Daybreak. Enter Orsic and Attendant.

Orsic. Stay thou without, and hide thyself, and wait,
Or rather join the others by the brook,
And bid them hold themselves in readiness.
(Exit Attendant.)
Thus far I traced her through the forest gloom,
I think it must be she. Now will I wait
And see what comes of it—
(Orsic conceals himself. Enter Gunter and Oddrun.)

Gunter. So soon thou goest. The sky is still alive
With passion-tender stars that cannot keep
For very joy from trembling. See the east
Is scarcely grey, the fireflies come and go
Mid the nightflowers that keep their glowing breasts
Unveiled to all the sweetness of the night,
But coyly hide them at the glance of dawn,
Her earliest glance; nay, linger yet awhile.

Oddrun. How sweet they are! King's candles in our youth
We used to call them, now I've changed the name,
And call them lover's candles.

Gunter. Here's our seat,
The seat where first I heard that I was loved,
Where first I held thee in my arms; Ah me!
So long ago, and yet thou art not mine.

Oddrun. Am I not thine?—Nay, dearest, I am thine;
Thy presence is about me day and night,
Waking and sleeping. Thou hast grown a part
Of all my thoughts and actions, and thy love,

Like the fresh fragrance of the roses here
That mingles with the starlight and the breeze,
Fills all my life with sweetness. I am thine.
GUNTER. And yet not mine, or wherefore must we beg
The kind connivance of the trusty night,
And bid her wrap us in her dusky robe
That we may meet and whisper? Nay, not mine,
Or wherefore do I lose thee with the dawn?
ODDRUN. Methinks that love is even sweeter thus,
Blent with night's tender beauty, with the voice
Of midnight brooks, the light of silent stars,
The cool fresh scent of dewbathed flowers, the hush
That steals like solemn music on the heart,
For thus it seems to grow a holy dream,
And gently lulled upon night's quiet breast
It lies secure from all the toil and heat,
The hurry, dust, and bustle of the day.
GUNTER. But I would have thee for my own indeed,
Not as a sweet dream only, but a wife,
All mine, quite mine.
ODDRUN. And I am all thine own,
All thine, quite thine; nay, is not that enough?
Has love a deeper secret yet to tell
Than any he has taught us, one so sweet
He dare not breathe it here amid the flowers
For fear the stars should hear it? Nay, dear love,
We know them all, have not we learnt them all?
Then let us be content.
GUNTER. Ay, but the day
Treadeth too swiftly on the steps of night,
And then how dull and wearisome the days,
How lone the nights are when thou dost not come.
If thou wert with me always, all my life,
So desert now, would kindle into joy
And blossom like a garden. Sweet, thy love
Is not so deep as mine, or thou wouldst long
Never to leave me.
ODDRUN. All my heart is filled
With that one longing, dearest, could I buy
The safe, sweet name of Gunter's wedded wife

With loss of all save thy true love alone,
'T were quickly bought, but since that cannot be,
Why should we murmur? Let us rather take
With thankfulness the gifts the gods bestow,
This quiet garden and the secret night
That keep a space for kisses, for low words
Of fond endearment, and for loying looks
Amid the angry turmoil of the world.

GUNTER. But didst thou love me as I love thee, sweet,
Thou wouldst come to me in the open day
Spite a whole world of brothers. Be but here
And Atli's wrath shall spend its stormy rage
On our defences, as the ocean waves
That vainly fret the rock.

ODDRUN. Nay, but my love,
I would not break my future from my past,
And Atli is my brother, kind to me
In all things save in this. While still a child,
A little toddling thing that romped about,
I well remember Atli holding me
High up among the boughs to snatch the fruit,
And how I laughed down from my leafy nest
Into the face that loved me, and indeed
My earliest thoughts were full of him alone,
The gentle, mighty brother. Bear with me,
I would not vex or lose him, would not breed
New strife between your kingdoms, would not hear
Pale, haggard women curse my bridal day
That robbed them of their husbands and their sons,
Let us be patient, love, and wait the end.

GUNTER. And so thou goest, and when to-morrow night
Our star steals trembling o'er the eastern verge,
It will not light thee to me.

ODDRUN. Trust me, love,
'T is but a little while that I shall be
An exile from this garden and thine arms.

GUNTER. But O! how long that little while will last,
With thee the fragrance passeth from the flowers,
The freshness from the evening, and the charm
From night, the moonlight, and these garden walks;

Where thou art not, the world is bleak and cold,
Or parched and arid, but at thy approach
She clothes herself in beauty, joy, and life.
And every courtier, page, and serving man
May see thee, live within the hallowed light
Of thy sweet presence, watch thee speak and move,
Only thy love must not behold thy face.

ODDRUN. They do not see me, dearest; thou alone
Hast seen me. In their eyes I live and move
A proud just regent who delights in nought
But weeks of hunting in the forest glades
That bound thy kingdom; fair, perhaps, but cold;
Not thy Oddrun, she is but where thou art.
For as these flowers that in the garish day
Shut up their petals, but when gentle night
Comes to them with the moon that is their sun,
Disclose their inmost hearts, so in the glare
Of the bright court I am but as a queen,
Who here, within thine arms, before thine eyes,
Stand just a simple woman and thy love.
But see, pale amber breaking from the east
O'erfloods the grey, quenching the tender stars
In warmer, deeper glows of richer light,
As passion drowns all smaller loves and joys,
And soon the sun will set the clouds on fire,
But I must go, and leave my sun behind,
My sun, my life, my joy, my day in night.
Farewell, farewell!

GUNTER. Nay, we are safe enough,
And I will bring thee to the ancient oak
At which thy steed is tethered.

(Exeunt Gunter and Oddrun. Orsic comes forewards.)

ORSIC. So you are safe enough—and yet I heard —
Well quite enough to know what must be done.

(Exit Orsic. Enter Hagen and Giselher.)

GISELHER. They are not in the garden.

HAGEN. I have searched
The palace too in vain.

GISELHER. She must be gone.

HAGEN. Would she had never come.

GISELHER. And yet 't were well
She still were here.
HAGEN. Yes, but as just to-day
We want her, she is gone, it is the way
Of lovers.
GISELHER. Well, the prisoners are safe.
HAGEN. Here comes the king.
(Enter Gunter.)
GUNTER. Why brothers, what has broken on your sleep
Thus early, and compelled your slothful eyes
For once to view the beauties of the dawn?
HAGEN. Not one of love's wild freaks you may be sure,
But weighty business. By the forest brook
Five men last night were taken, strangers here,
We hold them prisoners.
GISELHER. As it seems they come
From Atli's court, as yet we know no more;
Their business, as they say, is to the king.
GUNTER. 'T is strange that they should seek us here—
should come
Thus unannounced.
HAGEN. Perchance, King Atli dreamt
A dove of his had learnt to mate with hawks,
And so he seeks to snare her near their nest.
GUNTER. Well, bring them hither.
(Exit Giselher.)
It was well she stayed
Till they were taken; thus the wants of love
Grow prophecies to warn us of our foes.
HAGEN. I cannot understand such prophecies,
I am no lover, so I want the gift
Of superfine presentiment to find
Wisdom in clouds, and omens in the flowers;
But still my eyes are open, yours are rapt
In dreams and fancies, till you cannot see
The stone o'er which you stumble; you behold
The wondrous vision, I the actual fact
Which is just this that Atli's sister brings
Death for her dowry.

GUNTER. Wherefore should you fear?
For six long years with each returning day
You break upon my quiet realm of love
With warnings raven-harsh, forbodings dire,
And prophecies of evil; yet your dreams,
Though far less sweet, have been as vain as mine.
HAGEN. Long may they be so, but in all these years
What have you gained? What do you hope to gain
In half a dozen more?
GUNTER. Atli at length
May yield.
HAGEN. Ay, and the moon may tumble down
To serve you as a footstool. It may be,
Why not? I cannot tell; I only know
It has not done so yet, and for my part
I shall not count upon it.
GUNTER. Still the king
Is but a man, his will may change in time.
HAGEN. Why, nothing in the world is half so firm
As a man's will.
GUNTER. It is my will to wed
Oddrun.
HAGEN. Then will the means to gain your end.
GUNTER. Why so I have; what could I do to gain
King Atli's favour that I have not done?
HAGEN. 'T is not his favour that you need; you want
The princess, take her; 't is not in the field
I fear to meet with Atli.
GUNTER. But Oddrun
Will not consent to this.
HAGEN. Ah! then you seek
To please a woman's fancies; that indeed
I count impossible. They do not take
The measure of the world, nor care to dwarf
Wishes to deeds; they long for this and that,
Not seeing that the *this* excludes the *that*,
And he who would possess them with strong hands
Must seize their life, and kneed it into shape,
Leaving no room for wishes or for prayers,
But the bare fact, and then they are content.

GUNTER. But Oddrun for my sake has given much,
Nay all—
HAGEN. Herself! nothing she wished to keep.
You ask her, will she lose you?—'No', she cries,
Or Atli? 'No'. She would full fain have both,
Nay, every thing; and so would you or I
Or any man. Each thing we gain or do
Excludes a hundred other gains and deeds
That we should like, but the strong man resolves,
This is the one thing that I want and then
He takes all means to gain it.
GUNTER. Let us first
Try every friendly means, since if they fail
The others still are left us.
HAGEN. All are tried.
King Atli came in war, you would not fight
For Oddrun's sake; he laughed your suit to scorn,
But asked Gudrun to wife; you gave him her,
Yet still he scorns you. Have you more to give?
GUNTER. Yet still Gudrun may move him.
HAGEN. But as yet
She has not done so. Think you she will gain
New beauty, freshness, youth with every year,
To coax from Atli's conjugal esteem,
What as hot-blooded bridegroom he refused?—
You think so,—you, a lover.
GUNTER. Who can tell?
O! Hagen, you have never heard Oddrun
Speak lovingly of Atli, do not know
The pure, sweet depths of woman's tenderness;
If you but knew them—
HAGEN. I might grow as mad
As other lovers. Thank you; I am sane
And wish to keep so. This my choice excludes
A thousand pleasant follies, let them go;
With them my chance of happiness, you say,
Well, let it go. I never envied yet
The kitten's joy in hunting her own tail
For all the pleasures of the hopeless chase;

I am a man, no kitten, and I choose
To know and rule my deeds.

(Enter Giselher and prisoners guarded.)

GISELHER. Here are the men; the captain of the guard
Reports that they were found encamped within
The freedom of the castle, fully armed.

GUNTER. Who are ye? Speak; what brings you to our land?
And wherefore this uncivil haste to set
Our laws at nought?

FIRST PRIS. Unwillingly, great King,
I venture to reply, since he to whom
Such office appertains, our leader sent
By our great master, Atli, to your Grace
Is not among us.

GUNTER. Where is he?

FIRST PRIS. Last night
He left us, and we know not where he is.

GUNTER. What was his purpose?

FIRST PRIS. To seek out a path
To lead us from the forest.

GUNTER. Send out men
To beat the woods. If such a man be found,
Let him be straightway brought.

(Exit Attendant.)

Now, Sirs, your land
And business, and the reasons you can urge
For armed encampment here in my demesne!

FIRST PRIS. From Atli's court we come, an embassy
Unto your Grace; upon our way we learned,
You had left Worms, and as our message craved
An early answer, turned to meet you here,
But in the pathless forest lost our way,
And so encamped.

GUNTER. What token do you bring
To prove that Atli sends you?

FIRST PRIS. Orsic bears
The royal signet.

GUNTER. Orsic?

FIRST PRIS. He, my lord,
Our leader.
HAGEN. What? The mighty Orsic comes,
He, the sharp sword of Atli, to this court?
Upon what business?
FIRST PRIS. That, most noble Prince,
Was not entrusted to us, but indeed
Rumour was loud before we left the court
Of a great festival by Atli made
In honour of his victories. Perchance
He would invite you thither.
GUNTER. Lead them forth;
Let them be honoured, feasted, but withal
Most strictly guarded.
GISELHER. I will see to it.
(Exeunt Giselher and prisoners guarded.)
GUNTER. See, brother, I was right, these riper years,
Life's summer, calm the storms of Atli's youth,
And all the mists of hatred that arose
Between us melt away in the warm light
Of Gudrun's love.
HAGEN. I would that it were so,
But give me leave to doubt, the summer brings
The grape to ripeness but the night-shade too,
And years mature the man, intensify
His passions, bring the hidden nature out,
Or be it wine or poison. Grain grows hard,
Fruit soft and luscious, venom fierce and strong;
Nature declares itself as time rolls on,
It never changes.
GUNTER. Yet, when green the grape
But sets the teeth on edge, which being ripe
Drops generous wine.
HAGEN. Because it is the grape
And not the night-shade berry. 'T were as wise
To hope the liberal warmth of summer suns
Might ripen this to that as to expect
Friendship of Atli; year by year in him
The venom ripens.

GUNTER. He, perchance, may be
The vine and not the night-shade.
HAGEN. In his youth
His deeds were wild, tempestuous, and bold;
In age fierce, cruel, sly, and passionate;
No comfort comes from such.
GUNTER. Yet Oddrun says
He can be gentle.
HAGEN. Do you trust the asp
Because its fangs are guiltless of its young?
GUNTER. Yet time does change us, we are changed.
HAGEN. In what?
Gunter who dotes upon Oddrun was once
Enamoured of Brunhilda. Then as now
I did not dote; yet I had eyes to see
That both were fair, ears to perceive that one
Spoke wisdom, and the other's voice was sweet,
Senses and passions to conceive that both
Were worth possessing just as well as you,
But I was Hagen, and I did not love,
You Gunter, and the rest followed of course
(Enter Giselher and Orsic guarded.)
ORSIC. Most royal Gunter, kneeling at your feet
I show great Atli's signet, and present
His greetings: if, indeed, as I have heard,
We have encroached on your demesne, forgive
A stranger's ignorance; and for his sake
Hear my great master's embassy.
GUNTER. My lord,
It grieves me that your welcome has been rough
Since you are come from Atli, and the more
For your own sake, my lord, if that you are
The noble Orsic as I think.
ORSIC. The same.
GUNTER. Then welcome hither, your great deeds are here
Our newest marvel.
ORSIC. They are done my lord,
Such as they were, and I have done with them.
GUNTER. Give order that the prisoners be released.
(Exit Attendant.)

ORSIC. My message, noble Gunter, is in short:
King Atli holds a lordly festival
And fain would see you at his court, with these,
Your mighty brothers.
HAGEN. Rugged are the ways,
Long, lone, and difficult to Atli's court,
Beset with foes both to the king and us;
We may not tread them.
ORSIC. Atli's voice has hushed
His enemies, your names are as a charm
To shield you from attack.
HAGEN. A voice perchance
To guide it.
ORSIC. What, can Hagen be afraid?
HAGEN. Perhaps he is. You would not call him bold,
But thriftless, who left door and window wide,
When thieves were near, and so I count him wise,
Not fearful, who locks in the gem of life
With bolts of caution.
GISELHER. 'T were foolhardiness
To risk the dangers of the way, to bear
Its toils, to leave our kingdom all unruled,
Merely to feast with Atli.
HAGEN. Which, indeed,
Your master who is wise has thought upon
Beyond all doubt, and only sends to us
A courteous message, nothing more, which craves
As courteous an answer.
ORSIC. Nay, my lord,
I think not so; a weighty business hangs,
As I believe, upon this festival.
GUNTER. What business, Orsic?
ORSIC. That I cannot say,
I was to bid you come and feast with him,
Such was the whole scope of my embassy,
No more; and what I have observed, remarked,
Concluded from his bearing and his mood
Are just remarks, conclusions, and no more.
GUNTER. Yet let us hear them, Orsic.

ORSIC. Noble King,
They are no certainties; 't would be unwise
In you to build upon them. I may err.
GUNTER. I ask your counsel as a friend.
ORSIC. In truth,
I am your friend, and many of the court
Regret with me the coldness that has grown
Between the king and you; this Atli knows,
Who therefore chose me for his messenger.
GUNTER. What do you counsel then?
ORSIC. That if you wish
King Atli's friendship, you should go to him.
HAGEN. And wherefore?
ORSIC. Seldom does he change his mind;
If you reject this tender of his love,
It well may be that he will grow your foe
Forever.
HAGEN. But he tenders us no love,
His simply bids us to his festival.
ORSIC. Ay, but I think a deeper purpose lies
Concealed behind it.
GUNTER. Let us know your thought;
Speak to us openly as friend to friend.
ORSIC. Then will I simply tell you what I know,
And you shall judge of it. On my return
I found King Atli in a milder mood
Than heretofore, and much he favoured me—
HAGEN. Favours well earned by mighty deeds of arms.
ORSIC. From Hagen's mouth such praise is sweet.
One day
We chanced to walk and fall into discourse
Of war and mighty deeds which Atli broke
Suddenly at the height; "T is time at length
To hang our armour up', he said, and I,
Noting his mood, thought the occasion ripe,
And spoke of peaceful rule, alliancies,
And constant friendship; dwelt upon your deeds,
Your power, your wisdom, your relationship
Unto the queen. Silently Atli heard
Nor seemed displeased. At length, when I had done,

'King Gunter had a suit which I refused',
He said, and then broke off, and walked in thought,
Murmuring 'too late—perchance not yet too late',
And so we parted.

GUNTER. Many thanks, my lord,
For your good will to us, and if in aught
We can repay your kindness, do but speak,
It shall be done.

ORSIC. It well may be, great King,
If all goes as I trust that I may wake
Your memory of this promise, though indeed
I am not used to beg.

GUNTER. Nor shall you need
Do more than only let me know your wish
And have it.

HAGEN. And on these few words alone,
The half expression of a passing mood,
You build your hope that Atli's mind is changed.

ORSIC. Nay, I have other reasons.

HAGEN. Tell us them.

ORSIC. Pardon me, mighty Prince, if that I doubt
How far it may be well that I should speak
Of Atli's purpose.

HAGEN. If he purpose peace,
We too desire it, have borne much, done much
On this account. You do the king no wrong,
Showing his purpose but to gain his end,
Speak freely then.

ORSIC. I am a soldier, I,
No lawyer, which my master knew full well,
And yet he sent me to you, a clear proof
Of open dealing. I must speak my mind,
Having no skill to hide it. Yet I fear
To utter all before I know one thing
Which I would gladly ask, although to blurt
So plain a question out in simple words
Smacks rather of the camp than of the court.

GUNTER. Ask plainly, you shall have a plain reply.

ORSIC. Then plainly, are you wedded or betrothed?

GUNTER. Why do you ask me?

HAGEN. No.
ORSIC. Then hear the whole
Of my commission. 'Go to Gunter's court',
Thus spoke the king, 'and bid him to my feast,
'But watch and listen; if he be betrothed
'Or wedded, ask, but urge him not to come,
'If not, then urge him'. This is all I know.
GUNTER. And 't is enough, I will go feast with him.
HAGEN. Nay pause; we need not answer yet. You bring
No token from Gudrun.
ORSIC. Since I have told
So much, the rest must follow, though indeed
I fear I grow a gossip in your eyes;
Of late King Atli did the queen some wrong
Which he would fain amend, and so he sends
Secretly for you, unbeknown to her,
To glad her with the meeting, and fulfil
Some cherished wish of hers, I know not what.
HAGEN. Good Orsic, we have kept you here too long,
Thus wearied with your journey; go and rest.
GISELHER. I will attend you.
(Exeunt Giselher and Orsic.)
GUNTER. Well, how now, Hagen? Does King Atli prove
The nightshade or the vine?
HAGEN. The poison plant;—
O! dread it more now that it looks so sweet.
GUNTER. Why you would starve mid plenty, fear to eat
Because forsooth a banquet might bring on
A headache; you are credulous of woe,
But when great gladness comes you shake your head
And will not trust it.
HAGEN. With the dainty bait
The mouse is caught, in sweetest honey drops
Fierce poison hid; thus is it with the gods;
They hide their sudden tempests in bright days,
Vipers and fevers in the balmy sweets
Of summer, dark despair in brightest hopes,
And death in joy. O! dread the southern breeze
That lulls you into fever, not the north
That chills you into life.

GUNTER. Yet let me breathe
The southern breeze and bask in summer suns,
And if the fever or the viper come,
Why I will meet or bear it. Better thus
Than close our lives to summer, and shut out
A thousand joys for fear a single woe
May chance slip in among them.
HAGEN. There you go,
Sir lover, what's a kingdom or a life
To half a dozen kisses?
GUNTER. Why this dread?
The honest Orsic is our friend, he knows
King Atli's mind, and counsels us to go.
Would Orsic cheat or lie?
HAGEN. I cannot tell;
As much of craft as valour has been shown
In his great wars.
GUNTER. Ay, to his foes.
HAGEN. And we?
Are we his friends? This friendship is but new.
GUNTER. Did you not mark his bluntness, how his tongue
Wanted the courtly art of gentle speech,
And how he flung his friendship in our face
As if it were a challenge? Can you doubt
The simple, honest soldier?
HAGEN. I can doubt,
And do doubt, trust me. Atli, too, in craft
May have deceived him, but to make his truth,
If he be true, his blunt simplicity
A bait to catch the rashness of your hopes.
GUNTER. Dare even Atli play with Orsic thus?
HAGEN. I know not, but thus much I know, the king
Hates us with bitter hatred, has grown grey,
Grim, gaunt, and haggard in the very sap
And flush of youth with pondering on the wrong
We did him in Brunhilda. Harsh and fierce
His friends account him, we are not his friends.
GUNTER. But may be, and his sister speaks of him
As faithful, brave, and loving. Be but just;
He has some right to hate us; let us own
That we have done him wrong.

HAGEN. Well, and what then?
It follows, as I think, that we should do
Our best to shun him.
GUNTER. Nay, but put yourself
In his place; judge of him as you would judge
Of me or of yourself.
HAGEN. Why so I do,
For had he done such wrong unto Gudrun
As great Brunhilda suffered at our hands,
I'd find a means of compassing his death
By force or fraud, and thus, I cannot doubt,
King Atli also thinks.
GUNTER. Not so, I mean,
Consider well the provocation given
And judge of him more gently.
HAGEN. Wherefore then?
Why, man, the very viper in the woods
Can doubtless urge a thousand weighty grounds
Why he should live, and sting, and pester us
With his existence. Do you ponder them?
I scotch him with the nearest stick or stone,
Because he is a viper.
GUNTER. Ay, but men
Are not as beasts; for each of us is wrought
Of good and evil strangely intermixed,
O! who shall part or judge them?
HAGEN. I, for one,
Shall never try to do so; what I ask
Of each is not: or is he good or bad,
But how he stands affected to myself,
And if I do your will, and serve your ends,
Think you 't is that I hold them just or wise?
No, on my life, but simply for this cause,
You are my king and brother. He, who waits
To criticise his friend and judge his cause
Before he strikes to help him in his need
I count most base; and if a foe be great,
Mighty, and noble, all the greater cause
Have I to guard against him. Why the wolf
That leads the pack is doubtless in their eyes

The best and noblest, which, perchance, he is,
I am no wolf and cannot tell, nor care,
But him I chiefly seek to slay or shun,
And thus it is with Atli.

GUNTER. Since you own
We did him wrong, and he is bold and proud,
The more should we accept his proffered love.

HAGEN. I doubt the liberal proffers of a foe.

GUNTER. Rejected love may turn to deadly hate.

HAGEN. Most deadly is the hate that mimics love.

GUNTER. Orsic who bids us go is bold and wise.

HAGEN. Orsic we know not, but the king we know.

GUNTER. No one can truly say he knows his foe.

HAGEN. Knowing him for my foe, I know enough.

GUNTER. Half knowledge blindeth more than ignorance.

HAGEN. None are so blind as those who will not see.

GUNTER. If we reject this offer, every chance
Of reconciliation will be lost.

HAGEN. If you accept it, all you have and are,
Sovereignty, freedom, life, they all are lost.

GUNTER. Thus may I win Oddrun to be my bride.

HAGEN. May, with the rest her love must needs be lost,
Or do you think to wanton in the grave?

GUNTER. Nay, I will go; now that relenting fate
Doth make free offer of the golden prize
I vainly sought to compass through long years
Of effort and endurance, shall I shrink,
Nor dare to take the gift that turns my life
To one long strain of music wild and sweet,
But dread to grasp the joy that crowns my crown,
And fear to gaze upon my happiness?

HAGEN. That which you have not dazzles all your thoughts,
What you possess seems worthless, when 't is lost
O! then, how wondrous dear your soul will count
This freedom and this crown.

GUNTER. When Orsic comes
To Atli's court, and the great king shall ask:—
'Where then is Gunter?' shall he make reply:—
'He dares not trust you'; when sweet Oddrun sighs:—

'Why doth my lover linger then so long?'
Shall she be told: 'he dares not fetch thee home?'
Shall all the court deride Giuki's sons,
While noble Orsic bluntly tells his tale,
And Dietrich laughs a jest, and Atli frowns?
Doth dark distrust beseem a royal breast,
Or coward fear become a kingly crown?

HAGEN. One man there was knew not distrust or fear,
And he was murdered by a traitor's hand
In the still night.

GUNTER. 'T was by thy sword he fell.

HAGEN. Yes, by my hand the noble Sigurd died,
But for thy sake 't was done. The very crown
That sits so light upon thy wanton brows
Is gilded with the Nibelungen gold.
Andwari's curse, a thousand awful deeds,
Uncounted woes, great actions, done and borne
By our forefathers since the dawn of time,
Our mother's life drained dry by secret arts,
Great Sigurd's blood, Brunhilda's dying cry,
And the frustrated purpose of the gods
Are wrought into the gold that forms thy crown;
Yet thou dost hold it light, a little thing,
A pretty bawble thou canst safely throw
Unto a girl to play with.

GUNTER. Nay, not so;
Take thou the heavy burden from my head
And wear it in my absence. Well I know
The past has rights upon us; and the dead,
To whom we owe the price of what we are,
Demand the strict full payment of the debt
Unto our children: I confess the bond.
The might that we possess is ours to hold,
Not to enjoy or part with; oft it seems
Rather a heavy burden than a joy;
Yet, every man is lord of his own life,
And has a right to stake it as he will
On the high purpose or the petty game,
At his own pleasure, not another man's,
Or be he king or beggar. Take my crown,

The full enjoyment of my regal state,
My rights and titles, might and sovereignty,
Sit on my throne, and bear my signet ring,
Be thine the might and honour, thine the care
Of this my realm till I return again;
For I will feast with Atli, though he bid
The dead that we have murdered from their graves
To sit beside me. I will take my chance,
Nor fear to look into the eyes of fate.

HAGEN. Nay, if thou goest, I too will go with thee,
And though I dance not at thy bridal feast,
I'll bear a fiddlebow along with me,
That, if it once is loosened from its sheath,
Shall play a merry jig at Atli's court.

(Enter Giselher)

GUNTER. Then, Giselher, be thou my regent here;
Hagen and I are bound for Atli's court,
Be thine the heavy care of this our realm
Till my return.

GISELHER. Why do you mock me thus?
Have you no sager heads in all your court,
None skilled in law, and none approved in arms,
That you would lay a burden on my youth
That ill beseems it? Trust me, where you go,
I also go.

HAGEN. For my sake, stay behind.

GISELHER. Why do you dread my presence at this feast?
What if I found some darkeyed Hunnish girl,
Some niece of Orsic, say, whose languid glance
Flashed at my coming to unwonted light,
Whose hot blood glowed and kindled neath the brown
Of her ripe cheek at mention of my name,
Whose then would be the loss of what I gained?
Might there not be a double festival,
A double marriage? Wherefore should you smile?
Trust me, I'll try my fortune.

HAGEN. Not this time;
We are but three, my brother, and on us
Lies the whole burden of the mighty past,
The golden harvest of the future is

To us alone. If stealthy swift mishap
Dart from a secret lair upon us three,
The whole is lost, all that was firmly built,
The slow, hard work of ages in a day
Must crumble into dust; while one remains
All may be saved.

GISELHER. Nay, if you fear a snare
And yet will go, trust me, I will not stay
Safely in Worms to pen your epitaph.
Nothing shall part us; if you go to feast,
'T is meet I should be there, and if to die,
'T is doubly meet I should be there.

HAGEN. Enough,
More than enough, my brother, hast thou done
To prove thy truth and courage. Stay behind;
On thee the hope of all our house is set.
To Atli's court we go to gather yew,
Not laurel wreathes or myrtle. Do not deem
That I am careless of thy fame, for thee
As for myself honour is more than life;
But honour waits not on foolhardy deeds
But on the great wise purpose calmly wrought,
In spite of danger, spite of fate. To thee,
The one left innocent of all our house,
The purpose passeth; take it, for we go.

GISELHER. Hast thou forgotten then the awful hour,
When the grey dawn broke coldly on the hall
And on the bier where lay the mighty dead,
With pale cheeks dabbled o'er with clots of blood,
And on the ashen lips and hollow eyes
Of those that gazed upon them with hushed breath?
Then did I lay my hand within your hands,
Then did I take your guilt upon my head,
That oath is sacred.

GUNTER. Noble are thy words,
My brother, but to-day there is no need
For any great display of nobleness;
We go to feast with Atli, that is all.

GISELHER. For good or evil, I will also go.

HAGEN. Then be it so; but ere we ride away,

Since none of us remains to guard the realm,
Let us take counsel and beneath the Rhine
Secretly sink the Nibelungen hoard,
Where none but we may find it.

GUNTER. What you wish
In this and all things shall be done. Farewell.
(to Giselher going) Hagen is still suspicious.

(Exeunt Gunter and Giselher.)

HAGEN. And so the end has come; the game is out,
And we are beaten. Sigurd from his grave
Takes hold upon us, and the thwarted gods
Smile sneeringly. We are no match for them.
Yet had all been as I, we might have stood
In spite of Odin, but my brothers' hearts
Grow weak; they dare the gods, and yet their eyes
Are dazzled by their gifts. This race of men,
That might be gods or demons, will not choose
Between the two, and so are nought, but crushed
By each in turn. That weighty point was missed
In all my calculations. We had won
But that ourselves grow traitors to ourselves
And side with our destroyers.—For a girl
A smooth-voiced girl!—No matter what the stone
O'er which we stumble since we fall, and now
Nothing remains but to play out the game
In hero-guise, and so 'To horse!' I say,
For the last baiting of Giuki's cubs
Shall cost King Atli many a noble hound.

**Scene II.** Oddrun's palace. Enter ODDRUN with a letter.

ODDRUN. Duped and betrayed! Ill fated that I am!
Was this thy caution Hagen? O my lord,
My Gunter, wherefore dost thou ride away
With haste so eager from the still abode
Of love and peace to seek a nameless grave
In a far country, where no tender hands
Shall gently wash the dust from the pale brow
And soothe thy limbs to rest, no loving voice
Shall bid thee sleep in quietness, or wake

The silence round thy grave with funeral songs?
Is death more sweet than love that thou shouldst go
So hastily, without one last farewell,
One parting kiss? Alas! I do thee wrong,
'T was I that murdered thee. I spoke good things
Of Atli to thee, and forbore to say
With foolish wisdom that his heart was hard,
And bitter, fierce, and cunning in its rage,
And now it is too late to do thee good,
But not too late to kneel beside thy tomb
With bitter tears, and don a widow's garb,
And stand confessed before King Atli's court
King Gunter's wife. Thus much may still be done.

(Enter Attendant.)

Make all in readiness, ere noon be come
I ride to Atli's court.

ATTENDANT. Before the gates
A breathless horseman white with dust and foam
Brings news from Dietrich for your Highness' ear.

ODDRUN. Give him admittance.

(Exit Attendant.)

O! ye mighty gods,
Who in the depths of darkness send us light
And hope amid the blankness of despair,
Receive my thanks for Dietrich, and work out
By his strong arm our swift deliverance.

(Enter Hildebrand.)

HILDEBR. The mighty Dietrich, King and Lord of Bern,
Sends greetings to your Highness by my lips,
And bids me say that he has smote his foes
Till they are broken utterly, regained
His lands and castles, and, in fine, set free
His captive friends, of whom myself am one.

ODDRUN. Great news, good news, my lord, is this you bring,
And if to-day I cannot to the height
Share in your joy, I pray you pardon me;
'T is that a danger threatens Atli's House,
For a dark fate, fearful, inscrutable,
Lowers thunder-black above us. We are lost,

Unless the noble Dietrich bring us aid.
O! ride again unto the mighty king
And tell him that Oddrun clings to his feet
In humble supplication, and entreats
By all that she has done in other days
To aid his plans, by all his nobleness,
That he will bring her succour in her need.
Ah! I forget that you are worn and spent
With the long way. Alas! it is too late.

HILDEBR. Not all so spent, my lady, but that still
I shall find strength to serve in any way
The noble king who is my master's friend,
Our great deliverer. Let me have a horse
Fresh, swift, and stout, one hasty draught of wine,
One loaf of bread, and I will ride again
Unto my master and discharge in full
Your embassy.

ODDRUN. O noble gentleman!
Ride swiftly, for fate hurries while you ride,
And bid the noble Dietrich meet me straight
At Atli's court. All that we have and are
Hangs on his coming.

HILDEBR. Even now I go.

## Act III.

**Scene I.** A mountain meadow with tents, woods and rocks in the background. Morning. Enter ATLI and ORSIC.

ORSIC. Ere noon they will be here.
ATLI. Then quick to horse!
Why, man, the game runs headlong to our toils,
It is impatient for its death; I thought
Before to-morrow night they could not come.
ORSIC. 'T were well to meet them in the plain, for here
The ground may lend advantage.
ATLI. Hasten down,
And bid my men be ready. We will skirt
The hills, and take them where the broken ground
Vexes their horses.

(Exit Orsic to the right of the scene. Enter Gudrun from the tents.)

GUDRUN. What, astir so soon?
Why, now I see a hunter's wife must learn
A soldier's vigilance, and yet 't were sweet
To dwell among the mountains and the woods,
To build a house by some cool bubbling spring
That sparkles 'neath the fern leaves, to forget
The hurried business and the anxious joys
That haunt the city, and to note the year
By nature's calendar alone;—that day
I heard the cuckoo, and that other day
You killed the buck.

(Enter Erb and Eitel from the tents.)

ERB. O! mother, see; the sun
Is rising, and the hills are red as blood.
EITEL. I heard a wolf last night, he cried towhoo.
ERB. It was an owl, you baby.

EITEL. 'T was a wolf,
They are the hounds of Odin.
ATLI. As you came,
A huntsman left me; in the western plain
Three elks were seen last night, a noble game
Which I will hunt to death.
GUDRUN. Three elks, you say,
There on the plain to westward. Are they far?
I fain would see them, for in other days
Sigurd spoke much about them; one he slew
In the far north while yet he was a boy.
ERB. O! take me with you, father.
EITEL. And me too.
ERB. You know, you promised.
ATLI. Not to-day, my boys,
For this is not a chase for such as you.
GUDRUN. And when shall you return?
ATLI. I cannot say;
Perchance ere night, perhaps to-morrow morn;
Use your free pleasure, either linger here
Among the hills, well guarded, or return
Into the city, as it likes you best.
GUDRUN. Now all good fortune in the chase my lord.
ATLI. (aside) A bitter wish for those whom best you love.
(Exit Atli to the right of the scene.)
GUDRUN. We still will linger here. The mountain air
Is fresh, and fragrant with a thousand flowers,
The woods are calm and still, and o'er my heart
Steals an unwonted gladness. Half I think
An unexpected joy is close at hand,
And from King Atli's brow the heavy clouds
That wreathed it since the day of Herkia's death
Have passed away. Within his heart of hearts
He loved her more than me, and yet she died.
(Enter maidens severally.)
Come, girls, to-day we will make holiday,
And sing old songs, and tell old tales.
ERB. But I
Will go to hunt the rabbits in the rocks;
Give me my bow and arrows.

EITEL. And I too
Will go with you.
ERB. Yes, but you must be still
Or you will frighten them before I shoot.
EITEL. I mean to hunt an elk when I'm a man.
(Exeunt Eitel and Erb to the back of the scene. The rest seat themselves.)
GUDRUN. Now sing a song.
FIRST MAID. What song?
GUDRUN. Whate'er you will.
FIRST MAID. (sings)
The world was bright as a summer day,
Sing; gaily the roses blow,—
Now the red is brown, and the gold is grey,
Sing; summer, sweet summer hath passed away
And there cometh the winter snow.
GUDRUN. Why child, this song is sad; the jocun dmorn
Merits a gladder greeting.
FIRST MAID. All the songs
You sing, my lady, are as sad as this.
GUDRUN. Ay, child, but I am old; when I was young
I sang gay songs and dreamed glad dreams; my life
Has not been very joyful.
SECOND MAID. You must know,
She is in love, my lady.
FIRST MAID. I in love!
She only jests.
SECOND MAID. I know 't is so, for oft
She sits alone humming a mournful tune,
And when we speak to her she answers not
But looks like one that wakens from a dream,
And when she sings at all, she sings of love.
FIRST MAID. But all sweet songs or glad or sorrowful
Are songs of love; what others should I sing?
Since all the songs I know are songs of love,
And all I know of love I know from songs.
THIRD MAID. If love is sad, I would not be in love.
SECOND MAID. O! but 't is sweet, ask her, to sit and dream;—

He saw me as he passed, and turned and smiled,
I think he smiled, I really think he smiled.
FOURTH MAID. And then to hear him praised, in the last war
How strong he was and valient.
SECOND MAID. See, it brings
The blood into her cheeks, the tell-tale blood.
THIRD MAID. If love brings blushes it is something wrong,
I blush when I am chidden.
FOURTH MAID. For my part
I would not love a hero who went forth
To war and left me in a lonely house
To dream, e'en now perchance a foeman's spear
Pierces his breast.
SECOND MAID. Ay, but a hero's wife
Is a great lady, near the queen she sits
Decked out with gems.
FIFTH MAID. And he is bold and strong,
And those that love him need not fear for him.
THIRD MAID. But tell me, lady, is love sad or sweet.
GUDRUN. 'Tis very sad, my child, and very sweet
And very short. 'T is all the joy of life
And all its pain in one. It is so sweet
That every other joy seems but as pain
To those that love; so sad—so passing sad—
Ah! you are but a child, you cannot dream
The bitterness of love. It takes away
The fragrance from the flowers, the joyous gleam
From the bright sunlight, from the tender moon
It takes the dreamy radiance, from our lives
It steals the life, and from our dreams the dream,
And from our joys the joy. 'T is life in death,
And death in life.
THIRD MAID. It is a fearful thing;
I will not love.
GUDRUN. Poor child, I said so once.
But we grow sad and silent; see the sward
Is smooth and green; go dance awhile, and dance
Away these fancies.

(dance.)

Why, Lydia, do you never dance or sing?
Are you in love too?
SIXTH MAID. No, she is not sad,
She does not weary out the summerday
With brainsick fancies, does not sit and mope
When others work, she works when others play,
And never grumbles.
THIRD MAID. Yet she is in love
With a strange man, a noble mighty prince
Greater than Atli whom she never saw;
Ask her about him, 't is a pretty tale.
GUDRUN. Why, Lydia, is this true? Are you in love?
LYDIA. No; not in love, my lady, not in love,
If love be pain, and bitterness, and fear,
A moment's fevered joy that must be bought
By weary years of woe, I do not love.
THIRD MAID. You told me that you loved him.
LYDIA. And 't was true,
For I do love him. Ever as I work,
Or talk, or play, I wonder in my heart
Does all this please him? So I live for him,
And in his love is perfect happiness.
GUDRUN. But there is no such prince at Atli's court
As him you speak of, tell us whom you mean.
LYDIA. This prince, my lady, is the Son of God.
GUDRUN. Why, Sigurd was the last of Odin's sons,
You never saw him.
SIXTH MAID. Ay, but other lands
Have other gods. I have heard tell of them,
Bright southern countries where no winter comes,
But the fig ripens and the olive grows;
There, where the blue waves flash in silver gleams,
And on the brows of chestnut-wooded hills,
And by bright streams, and mountain-girded lakes,
Are silent groves, and marble sanctuaries,
Where other gods are worshiped.
SEVENTH MAID. Ay, and they
Are not as ours, but gentler like the land,
And oft from out his waves a rivergod
Will rise to woo a simple village maid.

GUDRUN. Was such a one thy lover?
SEVENTH MAID. No; for then
He would have hid her in a mossy grot
Beneath his world of waters from the sight
Of Atli's soldiers.
LYDIA. He of whom I spoke
Is God of Gods, he made this lovely earth,
The sun, the stars, and all that we behold.
GUDRUN. He had a son, you say; what was his name?
What were his deeds? For Sigmund with his wrath
Did shake the world, and Sigurd's mighty deeds
Outdid his father's; these were Odin's sons,
But he, you speak of, is the God of Gods.
LYDIA. His name, my lady, is the Prince of Peace.
FOURTH MAID. He was no hero then?
SECOND MAID. He did not lead
His soldiers on to war and victory?
What did he do then?
LYDIA. With the poor he dwelt,
All that were sick, or maimed, or sad at heart
Came to him and he healed them.
FIFTH MAID. This is strange.
THIRD MAID. If he would love me, I would love him too.
LYDIA. Truly he loves you, all of us he loves,
Not with the poor, cold, changeful love of men,
But with a constant tenderness.
GUDRUN. Why then
Did not he save you from your slavery?
LYDIA. I cannot tell, my lady. This I know:
He wills I should be here, and I am here;
It is enough for me, I ask no more.
GUDRUN. Those that were sad at heart went unto him.
It is a pretty but a foolish tale,
There is no cure for heartache.
LYDIA. Mine he cured.
GUDRUN. Why, girl, you do not know what heartache is.
LYDIA. My lady, is it nothing in your eyes
That Atli's soldiers broke upon my home,
And slew my little brothers at their play,

My father on the threshold, and alas!
Forgive me that I cannot choose but weep,
My mother with the babe upon her breast
That laughed to see the flashing of the steel?
Was that no heartache?

GUDRUN. Woe is me! poor child,
How you must hate us.

LYDIA. By the mighty God
In whom I trust, I speak the simple truth,
I love you lady, and my lord the king.

GUDRUN. You love us, girl?

LYDIA. Ay, lady, from my heart.

GUDRUN. Why how is this?

LYDIA. That Lord whom most I love,
That Saviour who is called the Prince of Peace
Bade us love all men, and forgive their wrongs,
And dying he forgave his enemies.

GUDRUN. What then, your love, the Prince of Peace, is dead?

LYDIA. Yes, but he lives to love us evermore.

GUDRUN. He died?

LYDIA. Yes; wicked men laid hands on him,
And nailed him to a Cross; the mighty sun
Sickened to see the deed, the firm-set earth
Trembled to drink his blood, in that dread hour
He raised his dying voice, and prayed aloud
In his last throes for those that murdered him;—
'Father forgive, they know not what they do!'

(Enter Erb and Eitel from the left of the Scene.)

ERB. O mother! we have seen such wondrous men
All clad in burnished armour.

GUDRUN. Where my son?

ERB. Close by, for they are coming up the hill,
And they have eagles painted on their shields,
One red, the other golden.

GUDRUN. Foolish boy,
You must be dreaming.

EITEL. No, I saw them too.

(A horn within.)

ERB. Hark, 't is their signal.

GUDRUN. It is Gunter's horn.

(Enter Gunter, Hagen, Giselher and Attendants from the left of the scene.)

My brothers, O my brothers! what dark fate
Has brought you here, all dight with festal robes
And with so scant a following to the court
Of the great king, your fierce and cunning foe?

GUNTER. We come at Atli's bidding, to his feast,
And trust before we go to drown the thoughts
Of other days, our hatred of the past
In foaming goblets brimmed with Southern wine.

GUDRUN. Betrayed and murdered; at King Atli's feast
Your blood shall flow for wine—O reckless fools!
Is this thy forethought Hagen? Pardon me,
My heart grows mad with anguish. Here I stand
And chide with you, my brothers, on your bier;
O Gunter! it were better thou didst sit
High on thy steed, amid the clouds of war,
Cleaving the helms of heroes; Giselher,
A bridal bed were fitter than a grave
For thy young years; O Hagen! ye are slain.
Turn back again, turn back, there yet is time
And when once more you visit Atli's court,
Then come with serried ranks, and ensigns spread,
To wake the sleeping echoes of these hills
With the proud trumpet and the voice of war.

LYDIA. It is too late, my lady, Atli holds
Their horses and is even at the pass.

GUDRUN. Accursed be thy tongue—nay, thou art pale,
I will not curse thee, but accursed be he
And all his race.

HAGEN. Long are the ways to Worms,
My skill in running small, I shall stay here
And speak with Atli.

GUDRUN. Brothers of my heart,
Take but this parting kiss, I fear the last,
And do not doubt one moment of my truth,
However I may reason with the king.

(Enter Atli, Orsic and Soldiers from the left of the scene.)

ATLI. Well, gentlemen, your haste is to be praised,

Your horses have outrun my swiftest hopes,
And crippled preparation lags behind.
HAGEN. 'T is an old custom of our House, my lord,
To act at once, and so it well may chance
We take our friends and foes at unawares.
ATLI. And in good time you come, for you are wise
And I would ask your counsel. You must know,
I have a sister, and to tell the truth,
Men call her beautiful; not such a one
As was Brunhilda, still a pretty girl
That well might serve a lustful wanton's turn
If no one else were near. Since she is chaste,
Prudent, and faithful to me, I would fain
Make her a present to delight her heart,
Some costly gift. I am a man of war
Unskilled in ladies' tastes, my very wife
Has scarcely learnt to like me all these years
We dwell together, but the gallant king
Knows how to please a lady. Tell me then
What should I give the princess?
GUNTER. That, my lord,
'T is meet your sister should herself decide,
Ask her what best she loves in all the world
And give her that.
ATLI. Why man, I think I know
What best she loves, and I will give it her
But in a strange and unexpected form:
What think you of a bridegroom on a bier,
And garnished, say, with his two brothers heads?
A pretty present for a lovesick girl!
GUDRUN. (aside) He knows it all.
HAGEN. The proverb says, 't is well
To kill the bear before you sell his skin.
ATLI. Seeing him in my snare, I count him slain.
HAGEN. Yet bears have sometimes broken from a snare
To maul the hunter.
ATLI. If the hunter 's wise
He baits them with his dogs; 't is a fine sport.
HAGEN. And so say I; the bears are at their best,
So tally ho!—but yet methinks the dogs
Look somewhat craven.

ATLI. They are Hunnish hounds,
That bite but bark not.
GUDRUN. Mighty Atli, pause
And listen to me, ere with frantic haste
You strangle your own hopes. Of all your claims
To greatness, this I still account the best,
That deeply you consider ere you act,
And then act boldly.
ATLI. You would plead for them;
But this has been considered, they shall die.
GUDRUN. Why should I plead for them? If you have lost
Brunhilda, was not Sigurd, my dear lord,
Slain by their swords?
ATLI. 'T is true, speak as you will,
But not in pity. 'T is the crowning day
Of all my life, my hot hate pants for blood,
And even now it shall be satisfied.
GUDRUN. True, mighty King, your rage is just, but still
You are a king; the beardless jackanapes
May stake his all upon a single hope,
The silly favour of a wanton girl,
A game of hazard, or a drunken brawl,
And not be chidden; but a mighty king,
Wise, strong, and prudent may not act as he
And pass unblamed. O'er all the joys of life
He sets his own advantage; therefore pause,
Since hatred is to age as love to youth,
A hasty passion that doth often end
In lasting loss. You have them in your hand,
Make use of this advantage.
ATLI. So I will,
When they are dead, my hawks and hounds shall feed
Upon their carcasses.
GUDRUN. Have you forgot
The gold that Sigurd bore from out the nest
Of slaughtered Fafnir? It was mine, by right
It should be yours, yet still they keep it back.
ATLI. 'T is true, ye gods.
GUDRUN. Demand it of their hands,

And let it be their ransom. I will find
Another way to snare them to your hate.
ORSIC. She counsels wisely.
ATLI. Nay, but blood is blood,
I would not sell it for a sea of gold.
ORSIC. May it please you listen to me.
(Atli and Orsic walk apart.)
If the queen
In pure sincerity doth counsel thus
I cannot tell, but what she says is wise.
This gold would furnish means for the great wars
You spoke of; so at this price ransom them,
But bind them with a great and solemn oath
To serve you truly. We will find a means
To cut them off in secret as they did
The mighty Sigurd.
ATLI. It were just, most just.
But O! the joy of spurning Gunter's corpse,
Of mocking Hagen's anguish. Let me think.—
This is the greatest treasure in the world,
It must be mine, for gold is boundless might
Made visible and palpable to sense,
The symbol of my triumph and their shame;
These men shall serve me, who refused to bend
Their necks to Odin, and when they have done
My bidding, said you not that we would steal
Upon them in the safety of night
With sharpened swords?
(to Gunter, Hagen and Giselher.)
What say you, gentlemen?
Where is the hoard that mighty Sigurd bore
In triumph from the dragon's rocky nest?
By right it is his widow's; this you hold
From her by force.
HAGEN. In lordly Worms we keep
Gold for our friends, and iron for our foes,
Here we have only iron.
ATLI. Pause and think;
This gold shall be the ransom of your lives.

HAGEN. Lives bought with gold are scarcely worth the price,
I pay with iron rather.
GUNTER. Mighty King,
I never yet craved quarter of a foe,
Nor would I now for purchase of our lives
Pay but one farthing; yet, to gain your love
I would do much. Give me Oddrun to wife,
And you shall have the Nibelungenhoard.
ATLI. Oddrun to thee, base murderer of the brave,
Whose hot, foul breath did blight the budding hope
Of this fair world! Dearly I tender her,
Yet rather would I hew her limb from limb
Here in thy sight than see her wed to thee.
HAGEN. A pretty speech, to which our swords shall give
The fitting answer. Hound thy heroes on;
I long to see those longlegged Huns of thine
Lie sprawling in the dust.
ORSIC. I 'll have at thee.
HAGEN. Thou durst not for thy life; thy lying tongue
Hath always stead the better than thy sword.
ATLI. Yet pause awhile, wait till the others come.
HAGEN. In ones or fifties, we give blow for blow.
ATLI. Thou art more used to murder sleeping men.
HAGEN. And thou to boast thyself of others' deeds.
ATLI. Of such as thine a fiend would blush to boast.
HAGEN. True, they do not redound to Atli's praise;
For Sigurd was thy friend, and him I slew,
Brunhilda whom thou lovedst died on his bier,
And that sweet maid, the virgin Oddrun, was—
What shall I say?—to Gunter. In this game
Methinks the king has played a losing part.
GUNTER. Nay tame thy tongue.
ATLI. My sword is in my hand
Vile wretch and traitor!
GUDRUN. O! not here, not here,
My brothers yonder; for the mountain way
May still be gained, and there the spiked rocks
Narrow the path that opens to a gorge
Wild, dark and rugged, which no human foot

May tread but by this path. There hold yourselves
As heroes should.

HAGEN. Thanks sister.

(Exeunt Gunter, Hagen, Giselher, and Attendants, to the back of the scene.)

ATLI. And my thanks
Take also for the gentle kindness done
Unto your husband. You may rest assured
That I shall not forget it.

GUDRUN. May the wrath
Of mighty Odin break upon thy head
In the full sunshine of thy joy, as now
This woe has burst upon me. Bite thy lip
And knit thy brow, I do not fear thy rage,
Knowing thy love more bitter, which I bore
But now will bear no longer. Nevermore
Love me, nor cherish, nor put trust in me,
For we are parted. Go and do thy work
And take thy wage. I have no part in thee.

ATLI. Thus didst thou curse by murdered Sigurd's bier,
And now, behold, thy curses are fulfilled.

(Exeunt Atli, Orsic, and Soldiers to the back of the scene.)

GUDRUN. 'T is all too true. Our curses are the toils
With which the gods ensnare us. What we ask
They hurl upon us as a thunderbolt
To crush our joys. Now I will curse no more,
I must become myself a living curse
Clad in a woman's form, a hungry flame
To waste the House of Atli. Let me see.—

(Gudrun seats herself on a fragment of rock in the foreground. Some of the maidens climb the rocks behind. Others stand below.)

FIRST MAID. (above) The pass is gained.

SECOND MAID. (above) But there, before the rest,
The mighty brothers of the queen stand forth
Ready to meet them.

(Cries within.)

THIRD MAID. (below) 'T is a fearful thing.

FOURTH MAID. (below) How goes the fight?

SECOND MAID. Great clouds of dust roll up,
New men press forward; nothing more I see,
But now and then the flashing of a sword.

FIRST MAID. See! they are broken.
FOURTH MAID. Who?
SECOND MAID. King Atli's men,
And backwards from the narrow pass they roll,
E'en as the wave that breaks upon a rock.
FIRST MAID. But there, O see! are piled in heaps the slain.
SECOND MAID. And high on one stands Hagen with his sword,
He seems to mock the passion of the king.

(Enter Orsic in haste from the back of the scene.)

ORSIC. Bring up more men—five hundred at the least.

(Exeunt Orsic to the back, and Attendant to the right of the scene.)

FOURTH MAID. How stands it now?
SECOND MAID. Within the pass the three
Sit jesting, and before its mouth the men
Of Atli stand, crouched in a wavering ring,
Like hounds before a bear that turns to bay.

(Enter Soldiers from the right.)

FIRST SOLDIER. Not one is wounded.
SECOND SOLDIER. Fifty of our men
Lie in the pass.
THIRD SOLDIER. Well, we shall change the scene.

(Exeunt Soldiers to the back.)

GUDRUN. O Hel! O! ye dark spirits of the night
Assist me. Take from out these mother breasts
All that might mar my purpose, all kind thoughts
And tender recollections, all the past
But that which is inimical to joy,
All the sweet cares of gentle motherhood,
All that doth stamp me woman. 'T is your work
That I must do, O! make me as ye are.
FIRST MAID. Once more they form.
SECOND MAID. Again the clouds of dust
Hide them.
FIRST MAID. They seem to waver.
SECOND MAID. Atli speaks.
FIRST MAID. He urges them to hasten to their deaths.
SECOND MAID. It is in vain.

FIRST MAID. They break.

(Enter Orsic as before.)

ORSIC. More men, more men!

(Exeunt Orsic and Attendant as before.)

SECOND MAID. Once more there is a space, the dust is laid,
And safe within the pass the three appear
Unslain, unwounded.

FIRST MAID. 'T is an awful sight.

SECOND MAID. See how King Atli rages.

FIRST MAID. From the pass
The three are taunting him. They form again.

SECOND MAID. 'T is but to break. They dare not for their lives
Come within reach of Hagen.

FIRST MAID. How you speak!
You seem to side with him.

SECOND MAID. If ere I love,
'T will be a man like Hagen.

(Enter Soldiers as before.)

See, they walk
Like butcher-driven sheep.

FIRST SOLDIER. How goes the fight?

SECOND MAID. The ground is strewn with corpses. In the pass
Stands Hagen, like a man who cannot die;
His brothers e'en as he. They mock the king
Who foams with daunted rage.

SECOND SOLDIER. They are not men.

THIRD SOLDIER. Their mother was a witch.

FOURTH SOLDIER. Their lives are charmed,
No sword will bite upon them.

FIFTH SOLDIER. We are led
To certain death.

LEADER. Forwards!

FIRST SOLDIER. 'T is far enough,
We can die here as well as there.

SOLDIERS. Back, back!

(Enter Orsic.)

ORSIC. Forwards, for Atli waits you!

(Soldiers remain standing.)

Know ye not
How fearful is the vengeance of the king
On those that brave it? A consuming fire,—
Know ye it not?—is Atli in his rage.

FIRST SOLDIER. Then let him go and take the pass and pour
His rage on Hagen.

SECOND SOLDIER. Go yourself and make
King Gunter captive.

THIRD SOLDIER. It is vain to fight
Against the witchcraft of Giuki's House.

ORSIC. Are ye the men that tamed the savage North,
Fighting, by foes outnumbered, one to three
And were victorious—ye who shrink with dread
From a mere handful of outwearied men,
Cut off from succour mid your native hills?
Who shall believe the story of your deeds
That sees you now? Why look, the very girls
Smile at your terrors. Forwards to the fight!

(Exeunt Orsic and Soldiers to the back of the scene.)

SECOND MAID. By such as these the pass will not be gained.

THIRD MAID. Poor hearts, I pity them, 't is hard to die
Because a king is angry.

SECOND MAID. How they creep
Along the mountain side. See, now they break,
Not like the others in a slow retreat
But in wild flight.

FIRST MAID. And now King Gunter's men
Hurl down huge stones, and splintered rocks and crags
Upon the flying masses.

(Enter Atli and Orsic from the back of the scene.)

ORSIC. It is vain;
Strange terrors seize the soldiers, and wild tales
Of fearful import pass from mouth to mouth
Blanching their cheeks.

ATLI. No help is in delay,
For terror grows with every passing hour,

And the surmises of to-day become
The legends of to-morrow.
ORSIC. As they stand
No more than three can reach them at a time,
And which of all your men can cope with them?
ATLI. If others dare not, I myself will try.
ORSIC. Were it not well to set a careful guard
Upon them, and to leave them there to starve?
ATLI. 'T were a vain hope; behind the narrow pass
The mountains open to a wooded space
Walled in on all sides by high lengths of rock
Impassable to human foot, and there
Both buck and boar abound.
ORSIC. Then, mighty King,
Methinks 't were well to treat with them, for here
No hope of victory remains.
ATLI. To treat!
To call the wanton Gunter my good friend,
And Hagen my dear brother? Nevermore!
My arm is not to old to bear a shield,
My sword is still unbroken.—I will go
And win the pass, or lie a mangled corpse
At Hagen's feet.
GUDRUN. (aside) Now grant it, ye just gods,
Forget this day the sin my brothers did
When noble Sigurd died, deliver now
This raging Hunnish robber to their hands.
(Trumpet within.)
ORSIC. Ha! What is that?
(Shout within.)
GUDRUN. 'T is a triumphant cry;
Not from the pass it came.
SHOUT. (within) Long live the King!
(Enter Dietrich, Hildebrand, and Men from the left of the scene.)
ATLI. Now welcome, Dietrich. In my utmost need
Thou comest, like a herald of the gods,
Charged with deliverance; for behold, my fate
Hangs trembling in the balance, and thy sword
Alone can rule the outcome.

DIETR. Wherefore then
Is Atli grieved? What evil threatens thee?
ATLI. There in the mountains, the accursed race,
Giuki's perjured sons, command the pass,
Braving my wrath. Their shields and helms are splashed
With Hunnish blood; the noblest of my men
Lie mangled at their feet. There Hagen boasts
The blackness of his crimes, while Gunter mocks
The moanings of the dying. All my men
Are slain or broken.
GUDRUN. And the mighty king,
The thrice renowned Atli, like a child
Robbed of his plaything, storms about the field,
But dare not for his life attempt the pass.
O! he is bold in shedding others' blood,
Will risk the lives of thousands, not his own.
DIETR. And wiser thus, great Queen. He is not bold
Who ere the battle casts aside his arms
And hurls his bare breast on a foeman's spear;
We are the sword in noble Atli's hand,
With which he slays his foes.
GUDRUN. O King of Bern,
Most noble Dietrich, do not side with him,
Or thou wilt mar thy glories. That base man
With cunning lies hath lured unto his court
My noble brothers. Little did he know
The might of Gunter; little did he dream
That Hagen thus would bear him. When he thought
To slay them like a driven herd of sheep,
The lions turned upon him. Hold thy hand!
Thou art not such as he, thou art not used
To take brave foes at odds; thy noble name
Shines stainless in a thousand fearful deeds;
O! keep it spotless now. They are but few,
Pent in, by foes outnumbered, far from help,
Hold but thy hand, and let the raging king
Drink to the very dregs the bitter cup
He poisoned for my brothers.
ATLI. Dost thou pause?
Remember Sigurd's murder, and the death
Of great Brunhilda.

GUDRUN. Lo! I kneel to thee,
It is a queen that trembling at thy feet
Prays thee for pity!—I have pitied thee
When thou wast in affliction.
DIETR. Woe is me!
How shall I choose, when either choice is fraught
With dark dishonour? If I aid the king,
Shall not all future ages curse my name,
As one who basely overthrew the brave
At cruel odds? and if I aid him not,
I bear the stain of black ingratitude
Forever, yet no middle-way is left.
ATLI. Wilt thou desert thy brother in his need?
GUDRUN. Wilt thou be Atli's hangman, lower still
His kept assassin?
ATLI. Think upon thine oaths.
DIETR. It must be so; yet now, when might is new,
When I am scarcely seated on the throne,
Just made a king, now, even as the storm
Seemed overblown, and in the sunny light
Of rising hope my future life lay spread
A fertile country, waiting for my hand
To plant great deeds upon it; it is hard.
ATLI. I did not pause when thou hadst need of me.
DIETR. True, true! But just to take a upas-tree
And set it where the vineyard should have been,
That its foul scent may poison all the air,
And blight the cornfields.
GUDRUN. O! be bold, and dare
To do the right thing in the midst of wrong,
What though these lesser men should call it crime?
They are not Dietrich. Be thyself thy law,
And spare the mighty in their great distress.
HILDEBR. Ay, and betray the one man in the world
Who in thy bitter need was true to thee.
GUDRUN. They are thy brothers, Dietrich, for the great
Are knit together by a stronger tie
Than that of blood.
ATLI. Which holy tie was broke
When Hagen murdered Sigurd.

GUDRUN. O! beware;
Art thou a god to judge the deeds of men?
ATLI. Nay, King of Bern, stay here and at thy ease
Behold the fall of Atli, for I go
To die within the pass. Join in the feast
My good wife spreads for those that conquer me;
Be merry with them, and in thy deep need
May Hagen prove to thee as true a friend
As Atli was.
GUDRUN. O let him rave his fill;
Let not his frantic rage shake the firm mind
Of noble Dietrich. Hold thy mighty hand.
I bid thee but be still, that they may live.
DIETR. Ay, and be perjured in the face of heaven,
A base ingrate, who, when his friend presents
The bond for many years of kindness done,
Coldly replies: 'it does not suit me now,
To think of all the good you did to me!'
Forwards! my men, that we may do a deed
Dark, base, and cruel, that shall soil the fame
Of all our late won glories, and infect
Our future lives, for it must needs be done.
(Exeunt Dietrich and Men, Atli and Orsic to the back of the scene.)
GUDRUN. 'T is past; the die is thrown, and they are slain;
And what remains to me then? One dark hour
Of bitter triumph, and a quiet grave.
(shout within.)
Why do I linger here? Am I afraid
To see the great end of their tragedy;
To stand beside them in their parting hour
And whisper, 'comfort, ye shall be avenged?'
(Exit Gudrun to the back of the scene.)
FIRST MAID. See how great Dietrich strides unto the pass.
SECOND MAID. 'T is Hildebrand beside him.
FIRST MAID. Close behind
Follow the others.
SECOND MAID. Now they pause and speak.

FIRST MAID. Ha! 't is but for a moment, see! they close,
For Dietrich flashes on them with a sword
Bright as the lightning.
FOURTH MAID. Tell us more.
SECOND MAID. Alas!
No more is to be seen.
FIRST MAID. Above the dust,
Looms a great figure in the middle pass.
'T is Dietrich.
SECOND MAID. It is Hagen.
FIRST MAID. See; O see!
It is the helmet of the Lord of Bern.
The pass is taken.
SECOND MAID. O! behold the queen.
MAIDENS. (below) What is it? Tell us.
SECOND MAID. She has seized a sword,
And springs on Atli's nobles.
FIRST MAID. Woe is me!
She strikes.
SECOND MAID. And see, the brother of the king
Writhes in the dust.
(shout within.)
FIRST MAID. But now from out the pass
Great Dietrich comes.
SECOND MAID. What is it? O ye gods!
FIRST MAID. Great Hagen is his captive and the rest.
SECOND MAID. My head grows dizzy. I can see no more.
FIRST MAID. King Atli mocks them, but the Lord of Bern
Seems to reprove him. Now they are at hand.

(Enter Atli, Dietrich, Hildebrand, and Men, Orsic and Soldiers, Gunter, Hagen and Giselher bound, Gudrun following.)

DIETRICH. The deed is done, so give me leave to go;
This is no time for feasting. This dark day
Will cast its shadow on all coming days,
Dulling their joys; yet, first I pray thee grant
A word or two alone.
(Atli and Dietrich walk apart.)
I have thy word,
No harm shall happen to thy noble queen.

ATLI. Nay I have sworn it.
DIETRICH. Yet beware of her,
For she is greatly wronged.
ATLI. I fear her not,
E'en so she raged o'er Sigurd's mangled corpse,
And now she sides with Hagen.
DIETRICH. Yet beware.—
Most noble Queen, who never any more
Wilt smile to see me come, or call me friend,
Thy words were true, for Dietrich's fame is dimmed;
I have been Atli's hangman, lower still
His kept assassin.
GUDRUN. Base, my Lord of Bern,
Most base art thou, and faithless to the gods;
They gave thee might to carry out the ends
Which thy just soul conceived; it now is made
The pander to a tyrant's bloody lust.
DIETRICH. Just are thy words, but yet, most noble Queen,
'T was surely fate that wrought this deed, not I.
GUDRUN. Ay, call thy crime thy fate, and run away,
Nor dare to view the outcome of thy deed,
Such girlish tricks can hardly cheat thy soul;
How shall they blind the gods?
DIETRICH. My heart discerns
Vague forms of coming ills, but this I know,
Mid all its woes the future has in store
No day so sad as this.

(Exeunt Dietrich, Hildebrand and Men)

ATLI. What ills may come
I know not, but my joy is at the height,
And I will give it scope. Come, bind them fast
Unto the trees that we may mock their woe.
Now, ye base brood, ye crafty murderers
Of sleeping men, I have you in my hands.
GUNTER. What we have done is done. Thou hast the might
To state thy wrongs at full, and to exact
The fullest penalty, I am no girl
To question of thy justice, or protest,
Seeing my sword is broken in my hand,

Against thy sentence. Do thy worst, for we
Are strong to bear it. But my brother here,
This Giselher, has never done thee wrong,
For he was guiltless of great Sigurd's death,
And of the other deeds thy hate doth urge
As crimes against us. Therefore let him go,
If that thy plea be justice. If 't is hate,
Do not such wrong unto the mighty dead
As but to name them here.

GISELHER. O base ingrate!
Who wouldst divorce me from thy noble death,
I shared thy toil, then let me share thy fame,
Now all the rest is easy.

(Giselher breaks from the soldiers who are binding him to a tree, overthrows one, seizes his sword and strikes Orsic. Orsic falls.)

ORSIC. I am slain! (dies)

HAGEN. Ha! ha! the lying tongue speaks truth at last.

(Atli stabs Giselher from behind.)

GISELHER. O brothers! 't is an easy thing to die. (dies.)

ATLI. Ay, easy thus, struck by a sudden blow,
He did deserve no worse, but I have asps
And vipers, overfed, that with slow fangs
Shall gnaw their bitter way to Hagen's heart.

HAGEN. Meet servants these for souls as base as thine.

ATLI. Ay, meet to feed on blood as foul as thine.
Come hither, Erb.

(Atli lifts Erb.)

Now pluck him by the beard,

(Erb plucks Hagen's beard.)

And smite his cheek,

(Erb strikes Hagen.)

And spit into his face.

(Erb spits upon Hagen.)

Now curse, my lord, for it will ease thy heart,
Now weep, for tears and curses both are vain,
'T is Atli mocks thee. Strike him yet again.

(Erb strikes Hagen.)

ERB. Why, father, it must hurt him, yet he stands
As if he did not feel it.

GUDRUN. (aside) It is well;
For easy grows the deed that I must do.
ERB. Now Eitel 't is your turn, but strike him hard,
Perhaps he 'll cry.
EITEL. Look here, this stone is sharp,
I 'll strike him with it.
ATLI. (lifting Eitel) Strike him then my son.
EITEL. O father! he has got such dreadful eyes,
I am afraid of them.
ERB. I never fear
When father holds me.
ATLI. Strike him, he is bound,
And cannot hurt you.
EITEL. Bid him shut his eyes.
And I will strike him.
ATLI. Go, thou coward brat,
Unworthy of my blood.
ERB. O father! see
He 's laughing at us.
EITEL. Quick, give me your bow,
I 'll shoot at him. (does so.)
ATLI. Thus do Giuki's sons
Make sport for Atli's children.
GUDRUN. (aside) Ye just gods,
Is not the measure of your vengeance full?
ATLI. Were it not well that mighty Sigurd lived
To right you now? Then were Oddrun thy wife,
And Atli your dear friend.
HAGEN. That deepest shame
At least is spared Giuki's fallen House.
ATLI. Ay, fallen, for great Sigurd in his grave
Has might to overthrow you. In this hour
Well may ye rue that deed.
HAGEN. I rue it not.
Not as a vassal was my brother born,
And freely he has ruled who should have been
Subject to Sigurd; freely now we die.
My mother said, Sigurd was born to be
Our lord or our destroyer; our free choice
Was calmly made, and still I hold it good.

ATLI. And thou, lascivious Gunter, doth thy heart
Still dote upon Brunhilda as of yore,
Or would Oddrun, my sister, serve thy turn.
GUNTER. A noble man may err in love or hate,
But a wild beast like Atli never loves.
ATLI. Liar! I loved the great and spotless queen,
The bright Brunhilda. To her halls I came
With noble Dietrich in my early youth
To woo her for my bride, but when she told
The mighty purpose of the gods I bent
My will to hers, content to be her slave
Whom she called brother, this was truly love,
But Gunter's love is lust, he cannot love.
HAGEN. And so it seems a rape was also done
On Atli's love. Poor King, I pity thee,
And half forgive thy pettish, surly mood,
Thy part has not been glorious; it is true,
Atli has been ill treated.
ATLI. Thou shalt find
My vipers bite more sharply than thy tongue.
Off with him!
AN OLD LORD. Noble King, do not forget
The Nibelungen hoard.
ATLI. O! true, most true!
It must be mine so that my heart may drink
Its full of triumph. The unbending hate
Of Hagen will not yield it; I must tempt
The changeful Gunter, and then let him live
Despised and self despising for a while
As my base thrall.

(Atli speaks aside with Gunter.)

HAGEN. Come hither, sister.
GUDRUN. Stand aside awhile;
Ye need not be afraid, we are unarmed.
HAGEN. I like thee thus; thou dost not curse or rave,
But, wilt thou act?
GUDRUN. I will.
HAGEN. Thou art the last
Of all the children of our mother's womb,
Thou must avenge us.

GUDRUN. Ye shall be avenged.
HAGEN. Swear it.
GUDRUN. By all the gods in whom of yore
My trust was placed, by all the awful powers
Who dwell in darkness and are now my hope,
I swear.
HAGEN. Of all Giuki's ancient House
Not one is left; of Atli's cursed brood
None must survive.
GUDRUN. Except Oddrun, I swear.
HAGEN. Thy children?
GUDRUN. Shall not live.
HAGEN. The brutish king?—
GUDRUN. Shall die, be sure of that, and by my hand.
HAGEN. O! take him in his drink or in his bed,
When death seems horrible.
GUDRUN. It shall be done.
HAGEN. Thou art my sister, I am well content
To find thee thus. Farewell.
GUNTER. 'T is not the gold, what can it profit me;
And, howsoever we may brave it out,
The grave is dark and hideous, and mere life,
The joyous sunlight, the companionship
Of living men, the trees, the grass, the flowers
Are very sweet, we are so used to them;
But I am sworn by deep and solemn oaths
Never to show the Nibelungen hoard
While Hagen lives, and day by day his taunts
Would mock my perjury.
ATLI. Thou shalt be freed
From all thy oaths. Now Hagen, ponder well,
Wilt thou not give the Nibelungen hoard
And save thy life?
HAGEN. Coin thou my blood for gold,
Thou hast it and canst take it, but from me
Thou getst no doit that I have might to keep.
ATLI. The hoard is mine, by Gunter's choice 't is mine,
But thou must die first.

(Hagen laughs. Atli stabs him.)

Bring me to the gold,

The wondrous treasure of uncounted gems
And thou shalt live.

GUNTER. Is Hagen really dead?

ATLI. Ay, doubt it not. Look here.

(Atli cuts the ropes with which Hagen is bound to the tree. The body falls on the stage.)

GUNTER. Then bring thy asps
And vipers to torment him; torture him,
For thou shalt never look upon the hoard.

ATLI. What change is this?

GUNTER. While mighty Hagen lived,
Whom my foolhardiness betrayed to thee,
Well might I doubt; now he is safe at last;
Thou canst not vex him more, and I alone
Know where the hoard is hidden. Vent thy rage
Upon me; I can bear it; ay, and laugh
To know thee fooled. Thou shalt not have the hoard.

ATLI. Away with Gunter to the Serpents' Tower.

## Act IV.

**Scene.** The bank of a river. The Serpents' Tower on a rock. Night.
Enter ODDRUN below.

ODDRUN. There still is hope. If I can speak with him
He may be saved. But ah! I dare not call,
Lest those that love us not should hear my voice
And mar my purpose. Even while I pause
Perchance their venomed fangs pierce the proud breast
Tainting its life. So near and yet so far,
My lord, my love. But hush! I must be calm
That I may find a means to succour him,
Wait—I will sing the song he used to love,
And if its notes should fall upon the ear
Of Atli's drunken guard, they will but think
It is some village girl that waits her love
On the lone hillside. How unfit the song
For such a place of bitter woe as this,
I used to sing it a long while ago,
Only a month, they say—a long, long while.
O! the sweet garden, O! the night, the flowers,
The tender kiss, all, all have passed away!

(sings) Spring has come, the tender night
Follows on the joyous day,
And the moon in silver light
Bathes the blossomed fields of May,
Will it stay?

Love is sweeter than the night,
Brighter than the moon of May,
Joy, and beauty, and delight,
All sweet things must pass away—
Love will stay.

(Enter Gunter slowly above.)

GUNTER. Ah me! It is in vain. The notes have ceased,
Or was it but a fancy? I am weak,
I almost thought that I was dead, their fangs
Had pierced so deeply. Then there came a dream
And Sigurd stood beside me in his blood,
But with a stern, cold face reproving me
Like one who judgeth, and my dream grew wild
For there were cries of battle, moans, and shrieks,
But I was bound and helpless. Then, methought,
A sweet, clear, silver voice rang from afar
And all the noise was silenced. When I woke
It still rang on. I thought it was the voice
Of that sweet maid who when the moon shines thus
Will weep for me in secret, and in dreams
Hear distant echoes of forgotten words,
Ah me! in vain.
ODDRUN. O hush! my love, my life,
My Gunter, or the drunken guards may hear.
My boat is moored below; two faithful men
Keep silent watch, and here are cords and ropes;
Be still and I will save you.
GUNTER. Faithful heart,
It is too late, for I am sick to death;
Giselher died and Hagen—that you know.
'T is a sad story, but 't is near its end.
ODDRUN. O! woe is me!
GUNTER. They wait, and I must go.
I stay too long with you, 't is Hagen calls,
He never liked our love.
ODDRUN. Ye mighty gods,
Must this be borne?
GUNTER. Hush! do not speak so loud,
'T is time to sleep.
ODDRUN. Break overladen heart;
The end is come.
GUNTER. Ay, you say well—'t is so—
Be close and silent.—There is fire and blood—
Revenge on Atli! (dies).

(Enter Gudrun and Lydia below.)

GUDRUN. Thou shalt be avenged.

ODDRUN. O! sister, he is dead.
GUDRUN. Why, what of that?
'T is an old story, girl, they all are dead;
I have no brother more.
ODDRUN. See, how his head
Hangs o'er the nerveless arm.
GUDRUN. The other two
Lie calm and quiet; he shall be your charge;
For I have work to do, much work, hard work.
ODDRUN. Thy grief hath maddened thee.
GUDRUN. Go hide yourself,
For Atli comes this way.
ODDRUN. Nay, I will brave
His fullest rage, and tell him to his face
That Gunter was my love.
GUDRUN. You mar my plans;
We have a feast to-night, your lover there
Must first be hidden safely—in the earth.
LYDIA. Oh yield to her, my lady, for her grief
Passeth all bounds.
GUDRUN. There, hide you by the rocks;—
(Oddrun and Lydia conceal themselves.)
So, that is well. Now for a patient face
And a submissive voice, and then—to-night—
(Enter Atli, Lords, and Attendants.)
ATLI. Oddrun is here? Her presence spoils my jest;
I thought to pack them neatly in a box,
And send them to her.
AN OLD LORD. Your most noble queen,
My lord, is greatly moved.
ATLI. She has some cause,
But she 's a mother, man, and you shall see
How I can coax and tame her. But behold,
What woman form in the pale light of dawn
Stands there, on the unhallowed spot alone.
A YOUNG LORD. It is the queen.
ATLI. O! my most wretched wife,
My heart is sore for thee; sad is thy fate
In which I was not guiltless, yet if all
Be justly weighed, not mine is all the guilt;

Therefore forgive me, for the children's sake
That are both thine and mine, and I will make
A full atonement to thee for thy loss
In gold, and gems, and slaves, as thou shalt choose.

GUDRUN. What good are gold and gems and slaves to me,
The lone survivor of a fallen House?
But lo! a woman is not as a man;
Your will is stronger and I bend to it,
But keep your riches.—Only this I ask,
Give me my brother's corpse, that gentle hands
May smooth his limbs to rest, and pious rites
Attend him to his place of sepulture.

ATLI. It shall be done.

(Exeunt Atli, Lords and Attendants.)

GUDRUN. The morning breaks, time hurries, woe is me,
The deed is still to do, which if they wake
Will be the harder, O! my sons, my sons,
I never knew I loved you till to-day,
When in my hand I bear the sharpened steel
That ends your prattling. If I let them live
I must not die or ill may chance to them,
And spite of all my love, their curse would be
On her who slew their father evermore.
Here must our cursings end. I am resolved;
But O! my brothers, bitter is the task
That ye have left me. Let those weep for you
Whose grief is idle; I shed blood for tears.

(Enter two Servants.)

FIRST SERV. The King commands that we deliver up
King Gunter's body to your hands.

GUDRUN. 'T is well.

(Exeunt Servants to the tower.)

Teach me, ye asps and vipers, how to bite
Sharply with poisoned fangs.

(Re-enter Servants with Gunter's body.)

There lay him down.
Where is King Atli?

SECOND SERV. He prepares a feast
In honour of this triumph.

FIRST SERV. (aside) Tame your tongue,
They were her brothers.

SECOND SERV. Ah! I had forgot.

(Exeunt Servants.)

GUDRUN. Come here Oddrun.

(Oddrun and Lydia come forward.)

There is thy lover, girl;
Take him and lay him kindly by the rest,
But bury them before the night be come.

ODDRUN. Wilt thou not help me?

GUDRUN. No, my heart is sick
Of this same mournful business; I will go
And set the feast in order. Knowst thou not
There shall be wine and music?

ODDRUN. Thou art mad.

GUDRUN. To-night doth Atli triumph o'er the dead,
'T is surely meet their sister should be there.

ODDRUN. O cease this talk, such bitter words as these
Are sadder far than tears.

GUDRUN. Nay, weep thy fill.
He was a pretty man before the asps
Had spoiled him thus; a girl may weep for him,
But I have weighty business on my hands
That tears might hinder.

LYDIA. Could I comfort thee!

GUDRUN. Why girl I need no comfort, for the king
Will give me gold and jewels, are not these
A sovereign balm for heartache? (to Oddrun) Do thy work
And leave me mine. Bury him and the rest,
And fly the court ere night.

ODDRUN. Why should I fly,
I fear not Atli.

GUDRUN. But thy woe-worn face
Will spoil our mirth—go;—take the girl with thee;
Take her, and use her kindly, she is true.

LYDIA. I will not leave thee.

GUDRUN. Why, thou brainsick girl,
What wouldst thou here? Thy love, the Prince of Peace,
Hath no more work for thee at Atli's court.
Trouble me not; thou art my slave, obey,
She is thy mistress now.

(Exit Gudrun.)

LYDIA. O! follow her,
Lest sudden desperation prompt her soul
To some rash deed.
ODDRUN. Her wrong is overgreat,
Her load of grief too heavy to be borne,
If here she stood with sharpened steel intent
On her own breast, I dare not stay her hand.
And O! look here, this miserable sight
Kills every other pity. O! my love,
My Gunter, dost thou know that Oddrun's hands
Are on thy hair? O! girl, he had a voice
So passing tender sweet to those he loved,
And such a trick of kissing.
LYDIA. Woe is me!
For thee, my lady; would my heart could bear
Thy grief for thee.
ODDRUN. Yes, I was wrong, my love,
Was wrong; I should have braved fierce Atli's rage
For love of thee—I see it now—but O!
This punishment is oversore.

(Enter Maidens with a bier.)

But ye, whose blooming cheeks and girlish breasts
Are innocent of woe, what would ye here?
This is a place for haggard forms, and eyes
That have outwept their brightness.
FIRST MAID. The great queen
Bade us attend your pleasure.
ODDRUN. Pleasure, child,
Woe is my pleasure, heartbreak is my bliss.
SECOND MAID. Yet, let us aid you, lady.
ODDRUN. Ay, 't is well;
Bright things should mourn for him. I am too sad
To praise him rightly. I will weep for him,
And you shall tell how great and good he was;
Yes, lift him gently to his place—so—so.
LYDIA. Where is the queen?
THIRD MAID. With pallid cheeks and eyes
Tearless, she bade us come, and went her way
Into the palace.
ODDRUN. Nay, that is my place,

Close to his head, for he perchance may feel
That I am near him, and he loved me well.

(Exeunt Oddrun, Lydia, and Maidens bearing Gunter's body. Enter Gudrun.)

GUDRUN. The deed is done, and I have shut them safe
In the strong chest. Three brothers on a bier,
Two infants cold and dead—a fit return.
O! 't is a merry jest to make Hell laugh,
That I, who bore these children in my womb,
Who suckled them, who watched their baby eyes
Brighten to knowledge of me—Hush! take heed!
That pathway leads to tears. I will be strong;
I must not weep but act. I must not think
That they are dead, that they will never cling
About my neck again.—'T is but to-day—
To-morrow I will rest me from my work.
Why should that foolish story haunt me so?
'Forgive them Lord'; 't was sure a woman's heart
Maddened by many wrongs that dreamed the tale;
I have no part in it; I have become
A terror to the world, and to myself
A horror. Is it not my own dear blood
That reddens on my hands? No tears, no tears,
Or I shall spoil the game.

## Act V.

**Scene.** Hall in ATLI's palace. Night. King ATLI and LORDS feasting and drunken.

CHORUS OF YOUNG LORDS.

Give us wine, it lends the young
Pith to arm, and wit to tongue;
Give us wine.

CHORUS OF OLD LORDS.

Give us wine, it lends the old
Passion when the blood runs cold;
Give us wine.

CHORUS OF YOUNG LORDS.

Wine is life, it thrills the veins;
Let us drink, whom none restrains—
Drink, and call the dancing girls.

CHORUS OF OLD LORDS.

Wine is life, and wine is rest;
I grow young, within my breast
Wake old dreams of floating curls.

FIRST YOUNG LORD. Of floating curls, my masters, floating curls,
I would go nearer, say an open breast
All flushed and glowing.

SECOND YOUNG LORD. Throbbing in the hand
As does a prisoned seabird.

FIRST YOUNG LORD. Seabird, why
A seabird, when a dove caught in the nest
Flutters as sweetly?

THIRD YOUNG LORD. Boyish stay-at-homes
Make doves their prey, but we have scaled the rocks
And tamed the seamews.

SECOND YOUNG LORD. O! their fierce, wild eyes,
When all the nests aflame, and the old gulls
Lie dead beneath, while stranger hands are laid
Upon the brood.
THIRD YOUNG LORD. Yet soon they learn to know
Our whistle, and to nestle in our breasts.
ATLI. Your maudlin poets sing of love and wine,
But gladder, wilder, sweeter far is hate
Deep, fierce, and glowing.
FIRST OLD LORD. 'T is the old man's joy.
THIRD YOUNG LORD. I love to mix the three in one wild night,
When some great city blazes overhead,
To drain one cup of wine, and snatch a short,
Sweet hour of sudden love, and then again
Turn on our trembling foes.
SECOND OLD LORD. Thou 'rt of the sort
That ripens to a hero.
THIRD OLD LORD. Ay, but youth
Spills half its joys in all too eager haste
To quaff them; old men suck their sweetness out,
They dwell on the full flavour of the wine,
And love and hate they roll beneath their tongues
Like dainty morsels.
ATLI. Ay, well said, well said,
And thus we learn delights unknown to youth,
For never did I taste such maddening joy,
Not when my blood first kindled to the notes
Of the wild battle, not when I beheld
My enemy first writhing at my feet,
And not when first I seized a flying maid,
All terror-pale and passion-ripe and pressed
Her throbbing breast to mine, did I conceive
Of such a rapture as I felt last night,
When I lay quiet through the long sweet hours
And thought:—My trusty vipers are at work,
They lengthen every moment to long years
Of slow endurance with their subtle pains.
O! this was joy.
THIRD OLD LORD. And then to lie so safe,

To be so warm in one's snug bed, and know
He writhes in anguish on the cold, hard stones
Or vainly fights the serpents.

ATLI. But at length
My gladness grew too great, I could not rest
But hastened to the Serpents' Tower, and there
He lay, all pale and gaping, newly dead.

(Distant music and Chorus of Women without.)

Toil and anguish both are past,
Mighty Gunter rests at last.

FIRST YOUNG LORD. Ha! what is that?

SECOND YOUNG LORD. The women wail the dead.

ATLI. Where are my boys? They have not come to-night
To drink their cup of wine.

FOURTH OLD LORD. They say Oddrun,
Your sister, stood and wept beside the dead
In frantic grief.

FIFTH OLD LORD. She left the court ere night.

ATLI. Why, man, I watched her. I have eyes to see
And hands to crush the false. She knows it now.
She stood and whimpered—for each drop of sweet
I made her drain long draughts of bitterness;
My heart laughs at the thought.

(Distant music and Chorus of Women without.)

Damp earth cools the fevered head,
Ye are quiet, ye are dead.

ATLI. Where are my boys?

FIRST OLD LORD. Perchance the angry queen
Withholds them from the feast.

ATLI. They are my sons,
And they shall feast with me, and share my joys,
Not mope with women.

FIFTH OLD LORD. They are young, my lord,
And it is late.

ATLI. Let kittens feed on milk,
But give the tigercub warm blood to lap—
Ay, blood and wine.

SECOND OLD LORD. You fleshed them yesterday,
They took it kindly.

ATLI. Ay, Erb cuffed him well
But Eitel—

FIFTH OLD LORD. He is very young, my lord,
But yet he shot out boldly with his bow.

(Distant music and Chorus of Women without.)

Pain no longer racks thy breast,
Thou art quiet, thou dost rest.

ATLI. My boys, I say my boys, they shall not join
In mourning for my foes. Ho! bring them straight.
Eitel and Erb! ho! ho!

(Enter Gudrun in a gallery above.)

GUDRUN. What wills the King?

ATLI. My sons, my sons, that they may drink a cup
In triumph with their father. Send them straight.

GUDRUN. Why they are there.

ATLI. Where?

GUDRUN. Among you. There.

FIFTH OLD LORD. Her griefs have maddened her.

ATLI. Jest not with me,
For I will have them.

GUDRUN. Take them, they are there,
I packed them safely for you in the chest;
They can't have run away.

ATLI. There, in the chest?

FIFTH OLD LORD. A strange dread seizes me.

FIRST YOUNG LORD. Hark, how she laughs.

SECOND OLD LORD. Open the box.

THIRD YOUNG LORD. Why, they are cold and dead.

FIFTH OLD LORD. (lifting Eitel's body) Poor little Eitel.

SECOND OLD LORD. You are pale, my lord,
And your voice trembles.

THIRD YOUNG LORD. In your eyes there grows
Something that looks like tears.

FIFTH OLD LORD. I loved the boy,
I have no children, gentlemen. Poor child,
Your sports are over now.

ATLI. What fiendish hand
Has done this cruel and remorseless deed?

GUDRUN. 'T was mine; it was their mother's.

ATLI. Why, in war
What soldier that had seen this lovely face
Had not been touched with pity? Who that heard
Erb's noble voice had not let fall his sword,
To leave the future age some grounded hope
Of a true hero?

GUDRUN. Thou art slow, my lord,
Give them thy cup of triumph; let them drink.

ATLI. O woman! deeper than the pit of hell
Thy soul is damned for this most bloody deed.

GUDRUN. Nay curse, my lord, for it will ease thy heart
And weep; for tears and curses both are vain;
'T is Gudrun mocks thee.

ATLI. Wherefore didst thou turn
Thy rage against the innocent? My breast,
Who wrought the deed, was open to thy steel;
Yet still I live, and these sweet babes are slain.

GUDRUN. For Hagen Erb, Eitel for Giselher,
But yet we are not quit. Thou 'rt still in debt;
Thou owest me Gunter. For the noble king
I claim thee, Atli, and thy bloody court.

THIRD YOUNG LORD. Ha! ha!

SECOND YOUNG LORD. So harsh, fair Queen?

FOURTH YOUNG LORD. What all of us?

FIRST YOUNG LORD. Take heed, she will let loose a storm of tears
Upon us shortly.

SECOND OLD LORD. O! behold! behold!

(fire breaks out in the hall.)

GUDRUN. My asps and vipers are sharp flames of fire,
See how they dart upon you.

LORDS. To the doors!

(They rush to the doors.)

SECOND YOUNG LORD. They are fast.

FOURTH YOUNG LORD. Give me a sword, a spear.

LORDS. (behind) The doors are fast.

GUDRUN. Your axes, swords, and spears are safe, my lords;
I have them in my keeping.

FIRST OLD LORD. Woe is me!
You tramble me to death.

LORDS. The flames, the flames,
They close upon us!

SECOND YOUNG LORD. To the windows, ho!

(They rush to the windows.)

THIRD OLD LORD. O! I am old, have pity. (falls)

SECOND OLD LORD. Help me up.

THIRD YOUNG LORD. (from the window-sill) It is a fearful leap.

LORDS. (behind) On! on! the flames
Are close upon us.

(They spring or are pushed through the windows.)

ATLI. (from a window) They lie below, one heap of writhing death.
Piled in crushed anguish, and behold new flames
Burst out beneath, around them. 'T is not meet
That Atli thus should die.

(He turns back to the hall.)

But ha! they stand
Amid the flames, and mock me. O! the dark,
Pale face of Hagen, Gunter's bloody locks;
Who is the fourth? 'T is Herkia. There she stands,
With a strange bitter smile on the thin lips,
Blue with her agony. They nod at me
In triumph.

GUDRUN. They are dead, they rest in peace,
But their pale shadows have the might to shake
The soul of Atli.

ATLI. Call the graveless ghosts
That wail in ruined cities, or infest
The pathless solitudes of desert plains
That once were bright with harvests, all that fell
To pave my way with corpses; bid them grin
And gibber o'er my death in fiendish joy;
Yet am I Atli. Ere an hour is passed
I shall be as ye are. I dare you all.
There I will meet thee, Hagen, once again,
There, Gunter, take the challenge from my lips,
Our strife continues. Ha! they pale and fade.

GUDRUN. With my last breath, take thou my latest curse,
For lo! I die. (stabs herself)

ATLI. Go thou thy lonely way
To thy dark place, wherever it may be,
Unburdened with my curse; but I will quaff
One last deep draught of wine before I go,
And to the dead I drink, and to the gods. (drinks)
But what is that? A white robe floating wide,
A woman's form rising above the flames
In solemn triumph. 'T is the mighty queen!
'T is she! It is Brunhilda!—at her side,
The noble Sigurd. Their bright eyes look down
Not sternly but reproving, with a touch
Of deep compassion in them. Yes; my life
Was dark, and wild, and wayward, but my soul,
My inmost soul, was ever true, and lo!
'T is for your sake I die.

(The roof falls in.)

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